



THE  
GREAT  
COURSES®

Topic  
Literature  
& Language

Subtopic  
Linguistics

# Language and Society: What Your Speech Says about You

Course Guidebook

Professor Valerie Fridland  
University of Nevada, Reno



**PUBLISHED BY:**

**THE GREAT COURSES**

**Corporate Headquarters**

**4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500**

**Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299**

**Phone: 1-800-832-2412**

**Fax: 703-378-3819**

**[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)**

**Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2015**

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,  
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form, or by any means  
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),  
without the prior written permission of  
The Teaching Company.



**Valerie Fridland, Ph.D.**  
Professor of Linguistics  
University of Nevada, Reno

---

**P**rofessor Valerie Fridland is a Professor of Linguistics in the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). Her interest in linguistics began as an undergraduate at the School of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics, with a specialization in

Sociolinguistics, from Michigan State University in 1998. After a visiting professorship at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, Turkey, she began teaching at UNR in 1999. Her teaching areas include general linguistics, sociolinguistics, syntax, language and gender, and language and social life.

As a sociolinguist, Professor Fridland's main focus is on varieties of American English. Most of her research investigates variation in vowel production and vowel perception across the northern, southern, and western regions of the United States. The goal of this research is to better understand how variability in speech production relates to variability in speech perception and how social identity (such as that related to region, gender, or ethnicity) affects speech.

The majority of Professor Fridland's research has been funded through grants from the National Science Foundation's Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences. Her research explores links between social factors and speech processing, filling gaps in the speech science literature, which does not typically consider social influences on the understanding of speech. In addition to this main focus, she examines how gender and ethnicity are enmeshed with linguistic variation.

Professor Fridland presents her work at major meetings of the Linguistic Society of America and the American Dialect Society and at the New Ways of Analyzing Variation conference. Her work is regularly published in such journals as *American Speech*, the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Language*

*Variation and Change*, *Lingua*, and the *Journal of Phonetics* and appears in a number of edited collections. Professor Fridland is currently editing a collected volume on contemporary Western States English for the American Dialect Society.

Beyond her work, Professor Fridland is an avid runner and hiker, as well as a parent to two linguistically precocious children. ■

# Table of Contents

---

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography .....	i
Typographical Conventions .....	vi
Course Scope .....	1

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1

What Does Your Speech Say about You? .....	3
--	---

### LECTURE 2

Does Language Influence Worldview? .....	10
--	----

### LECTURE 3

What Is Sociolinguistics? .....	18
---------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 4

Four Levels of Language Variation .....	25
---	----

### LECTURE 5

How Do Dialects Develop? .....	33
--------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 6

Language Change—What's New Is Old Again .....	41
---	----

### LECTURE 7

The Origin and History of American Dialects .....	49
---	----

### LECTURE 8

Your Shifty Vowels .....	57
--------------------------	----

### LECTURE 9

Vowel Shifts and Regional American Speech .....	65
---	----

## Table of Contents

---

<b>LECTURE 10</b>	
Language and Social Class.....	72
<b>LECTURE 11</b>	
Sex, Age, and Language Change.....	80
<b>LECTURE 12</b>	
Language Attitudes and Social Perception.....	88
<b>LECTURE 13</b>	
Language as a Communicative Process.....	96
<b>LECTURE 14</b>	
Making Sense of Conversational Intentions.....	103
<b>LECTURE 15</b>	
Analyzing Conversation.....	111
<b>LECTURE 16</b>	
The Mechanics of Good Conversation.....	119
<b>LECTURE 17</b>	
Mind Your Manners—Politeness Speech.....	127
<b>LECTURE 18</b>	
Linguistic Style and Repertoire.....	135
<b>LECTURE 19</b>	
The Gender Divide in Language.....	142
<b>LECTURE 20</b>	
Ethnic Identity and Language.....	149
<b>LECTURE 21</b>	
Socializing Children into Language.....	156
<b>LECTURE 22</b>	
Language, Adolescence, and Education.....	164

## Table of Contents

---

### LECTURE 23

Textspeak—2 Bad 4 English?.....	172
---------------------------------	-----

### LECTURE 24

The Changing Face of Linguistic Diversity .....	179
---	-----

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography.....	187
-------------------	-----

# Typographical Conventions

---

This guidebook uses the following typographical conventions:

- Italics are used for words cited as words (rather than used functionally; e.g., The word *like* is a youth solidarity marker) and foreign-language words.
- Single quotation marks are used for meanings of words (e.g., *LOL* means ‘laughing out loud’ in textspeak).
- Double quotation marks are used for pronunciations of words (e.g., “baf” versus “bath”) and words used in a special sense (e.g., Grammaticality judgment is essentially native speaker intuition about what constitutes a “good” sentence in the language).
- Slashes are used to indicate sounds (e.g., /b/).



# Language and Society:

## What Your Speech Says about You

---

### Scope:

**A**s a speaker of a language, chances are you haven't given too much thought to how it mediates and shapes your experience as a participant in the social world. But as we will come to see, language is fundamentally a social resource.

Language allows us to share ideas and relay information, but its greatest contribution lies in its ability to establish relationships, negotiate social meaning, and influence perspective. The social categorizing we do when hearing someone speak is one of the most essential properties of human language, but we often spend much more time worrying about subject/verb agreement and parts of speech. We typically don't realize the vast social work that language does for us or the valuable social capital it provides. In this course, we will see how language norms come to be collectively meaningful and socially powerful.

Using the sounds and categories from theoretical linguistics as our core units of study, we explore how linguistic variation, both subtle and obvious, is exploited by all of us in our interactional choices. We start our journey by looking at how social characteristics, such as gender, region, and class, have been found to substantially affect the frequency with which linguistic features occur—features as subtle as rates of verbal contraction (*gonna*, *hafta*) and t-glottaling (“ge’ it” versus “get it”). We will also look closely at how we construct conversation in rule-governed ways while being responsive to the ongoing negotiation of meaning. Examining linguistic differences based on gender, age, and ethnicity, we will see that they reflect and create longstanding social and linguistic ideologies. Finally, we will take on the language of the computer age and look to the future of the English language, both at home and abroad.

As the course progresses, we will come to understand how speakers are able to exploit linguistic resources to serve both functional and social roles. We will also examine how and why such variation continues to exist in our speech communities. A key component of this course is the exploration of how variation comes to be judged by other members of the larger speech community and how the complex intersection of language and society leads to the stigmatization or prestige of linguistic varieties and their speakers. It is only through careful examination of how language is used that we can begin to understand its role as strong social capital with both costs and benefits we rarely consider.

Although we all have access to language, we don't all have the same access to language. Language opens doors and it closes them. It establishes relationships and it severs them. It represents us and it can isolate or embrace us, depending on our match linguistically with others. In this course, we will look beyond the system of language to explore the crucial relation between what we say and how we live. ■

# What Does Your Speech Say about You?

## Lecture 1

The social categorizing we do when hearing someone speak is one of the most fundamental properties of human language, but we often spend much more time worrying about subject/verb agreement and parts of speech. We typically don't realize the vast social work that language does for us or the valuable social capital it provides. In this lecture, we will bring this aspect of language to the forefront. As we'll see, language variation is a crucial aspect of our physiological and conceptual system. We'll also learn how this variation comes to be collectively meaningful and, often, socially powerful.

### Language as a Social Resource

- Have you ever started a conversation with someone and decided that you didn't want to get to know that person better because of how he or she sounded? You can thank your socialized speech habits for that perception.
- We tend not to realize how much information we get from other people without even knowing them. Even just overhearing speech, without personally talking to the speaker, we make assumptions about his or her age, gender, financial status, and more. On the basis of a few overheard sentences, we decide whether this is a person we are interested in getting to know better.
- This associative skill often serves us well. It allows us to recognize other people with whom we may have something in common or those we want to avoid. It probably saves us from many uncomfortable first dates or ill-suited friendships, yet it's also a powerful tool we wield without giving much thought to how we have come to possess it or how we use it for both inclusion and exclusion.

- Speech is fundamentally part of what allows us to live a collective experience. Talk helps us to negotiate the social world and the actors in it, not just in what we say but in how we say it. It is through the shared meanings established by being members of a community that we come to understand and operate in the world as complex social beings. Speech offers a shortcut to determining who is like us and who isn't, who shares our background and who doesn't. At the same time, it can also shape our expectations and beliefs without our awareness of its sway.
- Although we all have access to language, we don't all have the same access to language. Language opens doors and closes them. It establishes relationships and severs them. It represents us, and it can isolate or embrace us, depending on our linguistic matches with others.
  - Those who have learned how to manipulate language as a resource are rarely even aware of the influential role of speech in forging their daily interactions.
  - For those of us with access to standard forms and institutional prestige, this influence is typically a good thing. But for those whose dialects are not the preferred varieties—whose match with institutional preferences is not exact—the social import we place on speech can be a punishing one.
  - Still, even when not afforded prestige, our speech does important social work for us; it may mark us as cool, hip, urban, ethnic, or young. Standard or not, our speech is part of the toolkit we use to fashion our identities.
- This course is about demystifying our use of language as a social resource. We will look at many facets of the relationship between language and our society. First, we will explore the encoding of social interactions with cognitive aspects of language. We will also learn about variability in the system of language. For most of the course, we will move beyond this more abstract understanding of language to examine how it is situated in our everyday lives. We

will come to understand how it is that our speech reveals so much about us.

### **Speech as Shorthand for Identification**

- As we all know, how you speak tells listeners much more about you than just the semantic message your speech contains. For example, language serves a significant in-group/out-group function, helping us to identify others who share memberships in the same groups that we do.
- Think about the type of judgments you make based on the way someone else talks. Would you, for example, feel confident learning to surf from an instructor who has an English accent? Would a “surfer dude,” no matter how intelligent, be accepted as a college English instructor?
- Our impressions of people are strongly shaped by the speech they use. The relationship we form with others (however brief) is most likely influenced by their speech. Of course, some speakers’ dialects are more revealing than others, but we all reveal many secrets with the way we talk—even those of us who don’t believe we have an accent or speak a dialect.

### **Language Variation**

- Linguists look at language in a much more fine-grained way than nonlinguists do. Though most nonlinguists probably consider language variation to consist of differences in word choice or global differences between languages, in fact, the greatest variation in language is much more subtle and extensive.
- Certainly, choosing between different vocabulary words (such as *pop* versus *soda*) can change the sense of a comment and tell us something about the speaker. But vocabulary (*lexical items*) is only one small part of what linguists study. More important is variation that is both systematic and embedded within our language system.



© originalimages/iStock/Thinkstock

The choice to use the *-in* variant over *-ing* signals that a relationship is primarily solidarity based, rather than reserved or formal.

- This variation typically refers to unnoticed features, such as which vowels you use (for example, British “f’ahther” or American “father”), whether or not you glottalize sounds (“bottle” or “bo?l”), or when you delete consonants that appear in a cluster at the end of a word. These kinds of variations are typically less overtly recognized by nonlinguists, but whether you’re conscious of them or not, they are indicative of your social place and social relationships.
- For example, a large number of research studies have examined the *in/ing* variation (as in “walkin” versus “walking”) in Englishes worldwide, finding much the same patterns of use.
  - All these studies show that some people systematically use the *in* variant at a higher rate, and this frequency of use is, in large part, based on age, gender, and situational context. Studies suggest that younger speakers tend to use the *in* form more often than older speakers, and men use it more than women.

Research has also found that people tend to identify speakers who use the *in* variant as Southern.

- In just a simple shift between two forms of the same ending, speakers communicate a great deal of information: their understanding of the formality of the situation or of their relationship to the listener; age; gender; and at least in terms of the listeners' perception, regional background.
- For this alternation to be socially meaningful, we must all understand and follow the same rule for variation; otherwise, the variation would be so haphazard and irregular that it would be impossible for it to be understood as meaning anything by other members of the speech community. In other words, it is because we have all learned the same rule for when and how to vary verbal *ing* as a marker of formality that we can use and understand it effectively.
- As we will see, many facets of language are available for such manipulation, often without our conscious awareness of what we're doing. We learn linguistic rules early in life as a product of our interactional experiences. They become so habitualized that we follow them without even being aware that we are doing so. However, this habitualization can vary greatly, depending on who you are and the social world you inhabit.
- Much of our language socialization depends on our location, age, class, gender, ethnicity, and experience within institutions. For example, women are judged more negatively than men for using certain linguistic patterns, such as profanity. In other words, we don't all have the same norms available to us.
  - We don't simply pick and choose among linguistic variants but must acquire them as part of our native linguistic systems.
  - Otherwise, these variants don't seem natural when we use them, nor do they signal the same meaning as they do for the rest of our speech community.

## The Social Utility of Linguistic Variation

- Consider two sentences that essentially say the same thing: (1) *That picture is, like, so cool*, and (2) *That picture is very lovely*. The semantic meaning of the two sentences is roughly equivalent, but we would draw different conclusions about the speakers.
- Moreover, based on the impressions we form as conversation unfolds, we may shift the way we engage in further conversation to identify ourselves as more or less similar to a speaker. In other words, we may converge, shifting our speech to match the style of speech we receive, or we may diverge, shifting our speech to be less like the other person's style. We use such strategies every day when we linguistically engage people in a variety of contexts.
- To see how this works, form a mental picture of the type of speaker you would hypothesize for each of the sentences mentioned above. You probably assumed that the speaker of the first sentence was both young and female and the speaker of the second sentence was older and also female.
  - It seems strange that we can make such extensive characterizations based simply on two variations of the same sentence, yet most people probably would not have a difficult time with this exercise. In fact, most of us likely do this sort of unconscious analysis whenever we encounter speech.
  - The fact that we have stereotypes based on the way people speak is not always empirically sound, as we will see in a later lecture. For example, most people assume that those who use *like* (a youth solidarity marker) and *so* (an intensifier) are mainly females, but research shows that these uses are also found among young men.
  - In short, language provides a window into the social world. As we will see, however, the glass is often slanted by our place in the world and our earlier experiences.



- It is only through careful examination of how language is used that we can begin to understand language as social capital, with both costs and benefits that we rarely consider. Our identity is strongly tied to the speech we use and our perceptions of the speech we hear. In a very real sense, then, exploring the connections between language and society leads us to greater self-awareness.

## Suggested Reading

Campbell-Kibler, “Accent, (ING) and the Social Logic of Listener Perceptions.”

Romaine and Lange, “The Use of like as a Marker of Reported Speech and Thought.”

Van Herk, “What Is Sociolinguistics?”

## Questions to Consider

1. Consider your membership in social categories, such as gender, group, and ethnic background. In what ways does your speech reflect those memberships? For example, consider your use of profanity; contracted forms, such as *gonna*, *wanna*, and *hafta*; and *in/ing* endings. When do you find yourself shifting? Can you articulate why you shifted from one variant to the other?
2. Think about encounters you have with others outside your regular social circle. Does the dialect or language they use play a role in whether you decide to engage in further conversation or make the encounter short? Why?
3. As a task for the next lecture, think about any time you attempted to learn another language. Were there aspects of that language, such as the way verbs combined meanings (for example, English *come* combines both movement and speaker orientation in its meaning) or the way certain sounds were pronounced, that made it hard for you to find a true equivalence in English? Did this make you believe you could never feel “native” in your knowledge of that language?

# Does Language Influence Worldview?

## Lecture 2

In our first lecture, we discussed the types of information that we assign based on hearing someone speak. For example, we may perceive a speaker with a deep Southern accent as being less intelligent than a speaker with a British accent. Why do we have such inclinations? Beyond being a channel for passing information, language is a social practice; as such, it is subject to certain habitual behaviors and associations. Language, as we will see, often encourages one interpretation over another, privileges certain facts over others, and shapes our perspective of our social world. In this lecture, we will look more closely at some of the theories about how language and society are entwined.

### Language as a Reflection of Society

- It's easy to see that language is enmeshed with society. How we process the social world is not independent of the language system we use to describe it. For example, calling something a weed versus a flower influences how we view that plant.
- It's also true that the way society is organized influences language. For example, there would be no tweeting without first having the social creation of Twitter. Language clearly did not create the electronic media that currently pervade our society, but such terms as *texting*, *blogging*, and *Googling* have arisen to meet new technology and behaviors.
- What may be less obvious is how much our lifestyles and social positions alter how we categorize and organize our worlds linguistically. Consider how you change your speech to suit the context of your workplace. If you're the boss, the fact that you possess social power means that you can make requests or demands. If you're a junior employee, you are less likely to use imperatives or commands. How we use language is shaped by our social roles.



**Our social roles shape how we use language—not just the words we use but how we phrase them.**

### **Society as a Reflection of Language**

- Whether we're talking about the creation of new terms or the influence of social position on the way we speak to others, it's not surprising to suggest that language reflects society. But does society reflect language?
- Consider how many of our pat phrases and idioms metaphorically encode culturally important concepts and beliefs. A good example is our cultural view of time as a valuable, countable resource: *Time is money*; *you're wasting time*; *you're costing me time*. Do these metaphors influence societal values in addition to reflecting them?
  - Time isn't a concrete entity and can't actually be spent or collected, yet because of our linguistic categorization of time as something that can be saved or lost and its grammatical role as a count noun, we are predisposed to thinking about time as linear and divisible. In turn, people who waste our time make us angry, as if time was countable and concrete rather than cyclic and renewable.

- Thus, this metaphor—*time is money*—actually influences the way we interact with people; it affects society.

## Linguistic Relativity

- In anthropology, language has long been studied as part of our cultural meaning system. In fact, early anthropologists were influential in suggesting that language itself influenced the minds of its speakers. Essentially, they argued that the grammatical categories a language provides shape how its speakers organize and perceive the world.
- This concept of language influencing thought is known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, or *linguistic relativity*. It suggests that language embodies a worldview.
  - For example, to say, “The child with the blue shirt ate chips” in English, we would have to grammatically indicate past tense, but we would not need to reference the child’s gender nor specify the color of his or her shirt beyond blue. For an English listener, such a scene would include a temporal aspect and an unambiguous color category. The listener would have to imagine the gender of the child or simply leave gender unassigned.
  - The Russian language also indicates tense, but the word for *child* is grammatically masculine, which some studies suggest may influence speakers’ ideas about natural gender. In addition, in Russian, the color category blue is divided into two categories (lighter and darker), allowing greater speaker influence on the image evoked. Finally, in Russian, the speaker would need to specify whether the child ate all the chips or only some of them.
  - The same scene may have subtle differences in the minds of Russian speakers versus English speakers because of grammatically encoded information in the respective linguistic systems.

- Linguistic relativity has been contested in its most extreme form, but there does seem to be a tendency for us to think within the confines drawn by our dominant (or native) language. In this way, our language shapes the way we perceive and interact as a society.
  - Every human language has its own unique combination of sounds used to pronounce the words of that language. For example, English uses /r/ and /l/ sounds, while Japanese does not. Similarly, Korean makes use of aspirated and unaspirated stop sounds that are not used distinctly in English.
  - When a language lacks a sound of another language, the typical speaker is neither able to produce that sound nor to even hear that it exists. To an English speaker, unaspirated /k/ and aspirated /k/ sound identical, despite the fact that to a Korean speaker, they sound as different as /r/ and /l/ do to English speakers.
  - This is a prime example of our grammatical system influencing our conceptual system. In other words, our language has imposed its pattern on the way we process the speech sounds we perceive. Objectively, both /r/ and /l/ and unaspirated /k/ and aspirated /k/ differ in how they are produced and create an audible difference. Whether or not you can hear that difference, however, depends on the language you speak. This process of categorizing sounds you hear into only the categories of your native language is known as *categorical perception*.
  - Of course, in our own culture, we are often quick to judge those from a different language background when they mispronounce sounds. Thus, the representation of sound categories, influenced by the way our language organizes them, also influences our social perception of, and beliefs about, those with whom we come into contact.
  - In other words, the social effects of our linguistic system go beyond simply altering how we hear sounds. That system also

interacts with our social categories to alter our perceptions of nonnative speakers, often in negative ways.

### The Extent of Language Influence

- Our experience with a particular language tends to orient us toward a particular representation of the world that seems natural and universal. It is often only when learning a second language that represents the world through a different grammatical and conceptual lens that we realize how much our language has influenced us.
- For example, translating the simple phrase *Where did John go?* might prove problematic in some languages, such as Malay, Chinese, or Javanese, that don't specify tense in the way English does. Although it's important for English speakers to note when something occurs in a time sequence, this distinction is not prioritized in some other languages, and this lack of tense might affect the way we view events.
- Another interesting difference among languages rests in the way spatial relationships are described.
  - In English, one can have an object enclosed in a container, such as a bean in a jar. This relationship of the bean to the jar is described through the use of the preposition *in*, regardless of how loosely or tightly the bean is contained.
  - In Korean, however, speakers must describe either a tight fit (*kitta*) or a loose fit (*nehta*) in the container. Unlike English, in Korean, the type of containment is relevant and is encoded in the language.
  - This difference may not seem important, but experiments suggest that English speakers are not able to recognize differences in tight/loose containment relations while Korean speakers are. In other words, the way speakers perceive spatial relationships is affected by the categories their languages provide.
- A more salient example might be languages with grammatical gender.

- In English, we have natural gender (*a girl* or *a boy*), but we do not have grammatical gender; that is, *friend* is neither male nor female in terms of grammatical endings. In Spanish, however, in many cases, one must identify the gender of a generic noun.
- Linguistic relativity tells us that this should make speakers of Spanish more attentive to gender differences. Gender identification is built into the grammatical system itself, thus shaping what is unconsciously taken for granted socially and culturally by speakers.
- However, research has not clearly shown that speakers of languages with grammatical gender are more likely to assign masculine and feminine traits to objects on that basis. Further, speakers of English certainly do not seem to display greater equality between men and women for the lack of a grammatical gender system.
- The grammar of a language itself can work in subtle ways to impose constraints on our social world based on that language's habitual patterns of use and categories. However, new forms often arise as awareness of these constraints increases. In English, for example, speakers often find ways around using the third-person singular pronoun *he* to refer to someone of unknown gender, such as using the plural pronoun *they* for the third-person singular; alternating generic use between *she* and *he*; or using a more generic term, such as *one*.

### **The Conditioning Force of Language**

- The idea of linguistic determinism—in its strongest form of language determining thought—seems to be fairly easy to dismiss. We are able to, with additional information, overcome most cross-language miscommunication and mistranslations. But we can't dismiss the conditioning force of language. Like grooves on a landscape worn by water flowing in the same direction, our language directs our thoughts to certain habitual, comfortable patterns.

- Although we can conceive of timeless statements in English, such as *I exercise regularly*, we are less likely to do so given the verbal marking for tense that our language requires. In contrast, knowing what I did yesterday, what I do today, and what I am doing tomorrow may be strangely conceived by someone whose language places less priority on knowing the exact time relative to the present moment.
- We may not find it hard to believe that language reflects the social world, but it is much more surprising to learn that the language we speak has actually created categories that limit the nature of how we process the world. As we continue in this course, we will need to remember that the relationship between language and society is a two-way street: Society clearly influences language, but language itself is also a social force.

### Suggested Reading

Boroditsky, “How Language Shapes Thought.”

Hill and Mannheim, “Language and World View.”

McDonough, Choi, and Mandler, “Understanding Spatial Relations.”

Trudgill, “Sociolinguistics,” in *Sociolinguistics*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How might kinship or color terms create differences in conceptualization or prioritization in different languages? For example, Chinese encodes birth order into sibling terms; what might this suggest in contrast with a language that doesn't, such as English?
2. Language may position us preferentially in terms of how we organize or conceptualize things, but to what extent do you think it is possible to be a “prisoner” of your language?



3. Looking at the question from the other side, we often seem to translate social or cultural movements into linguistic ones. Consider, for example, the movement toward *Ms.* instead of *Mrs.* to avoid encoding marital status in women's address terms. Does this shift thought or just language? In what other ways can you see that society may shape language?

# What Is Sociolinguistics?

## Lecture 3

Speech is not new to you; you know how to talk and spend little effort constructing sentences. But as we've already seen, language itself is far from simple; you have to know how sounds are produced, how they can combine into syllables, how to form new words, and how to make grammatically complex and semantically congruent sentences. Finally, you have to learn all the social rules for using the sentences you construct. How is it that such a complex, interactive system can become so implicit and simple? To help answer this question, in this lecture, we will look more closely at language as an academic object of study—as both a mental and a social system.

### Theoretical Linguistics and Sociolinguistics

- Linguistics proper has long been concerned with defining the language system in the abstract, assuming that this system is the same for all speakers of a language. Such linguists as Noam Chomsky, for example, study the cognitive capacity for language without regard for the actual act of communication itself. It is the goal of these linguists to understand the basic blueprint for language—the underlying mental system that gives humans the potential for speech. This theoretical approach to linguistics helps us understand how the construction of the brain limits the potential for the shape of language in specific ways.
- Theoretical linguistics is a static model. It is concerned with the world of language potential—what our cognitive system can produce, not what it actually produces. Thus, actual speakers in real speaking contexts are never studied in traditional linguistics. But to address the fact that language is not a purely cognitive entity, the subfield of sociolinguistics seeks to explain how and why speakers use language the way they do.

- Sociolinguistics marries the fields of linguistics (exploring the linguistic system) and sociology (exploring the social system) to understand the primacy of language in the construction of social reality.
- The major question at the root of much sociolinguistic inquiry is: How and why do languages change? But this question still ties the field to traditional linguistics. To understand how language affects and is affected by society, we must first understand the basic nature of language as a conceptual system.



© Vstock LLC/Thinkstock.

**Theoretical linguistics represents the computer hardware of language, concerned with the potential of the mental system; sociolinguistics represents the software, concerned with how the system is actually used by speakers.**

## Grammar

- The language system in the abstract is referred to by linguists as our *grammar*, which is equally accessible to every speaker. In other words, grammar is what every speaker of a language knows: the rules and principles for constructing sounds, words, and sentences. Note that this mental grammar represents your linguistic competence—your language potential in the abstract. It is not concerned with social expectations and norms for how you speak; rather, it refers to the cognitive programming you are born with.
- To understand this idea, consider these two sentences: *I want to visit John* and *I want John to visit*.

- Both of these sentences can answer the question: *Who do you want to visit?* However, only the first sentence can answer the question when the verb is in a contracted form: *Who do you wanna visit?* No one ever taught you this distinction, but it is something that even young children seem to understand.
- This constraint, it appears, is part of our mental grammar, something we all have access to without consciously being taught.
- Another example of mental grammar at work is the way in which we construct yes/no questions, such as: *Is the boy running?*
  - We could come up with a simple rule to explain how we form such questions from sentences: Move the verb to the beginning of the sentence. But note that it is a verbal element that moves, not the main verb itself. Otherwise, the question would be: *Running, the boy is?*
  - We might say that moving the auxiliary verb to the front of the sentence would get us *Is the boy running?* But what about another question: *Is the boy who is wheezing running?* If we applied the new rule to this question, we would get: *Is the boy wheezing is running?*
  - Clearly, we have to note the fact that it is the auxiliary verb that is moving. More importantly, it is the auxiliary verb in the main clause, a position that can't be linearly defined but only structurally defined.
  - As this example shows, we have an underlying grammar, but we aren't really able to articulate its rules, even though we still seem to follow them.

### Language as a Social Entity

- Although knowing the system is helpful in producing valid sentences, this mental grammar is useful as a social tool only when

it is put to work to produce an act of communication. This brings us back to the necessity of looking at language through a social lens.

- Language is communication only once it becomes a social entity—an actual code (created by the grammar) agreed upon and used by a community of speakers. In this sense, language is a social resource developed and maintained by those who use it.
- This is where language variation comes into play; what each speaker uses out of his or her mental grammar varies depending on the speech community. This is the point of intersection between language as a conceptual system and language as a social system.
  - For example, the merger of vowels in such word pairs as *cot/caught* or *pin/pen* identifies speakers regionally. Westerners have merged *cot/caught*, but Northerners still say the words differently.
  - All babies born with functional language capacity have linguistic resources to have separate or merged vowel categories in those contexts. But it is only when they are born into a specific dialect community that these resources are set in one direction or another. That is, they will either acquire merged *cot/caught*, or they will maintain the separation into two vowel classes.
  - We are born with the same cognitive abilities, but we realize different aspects of this potential. The resulting system is what is referred to as *linguistic performance*—what speakers actually use out of their competence (the mental grammar in full).
  - Sociolinguists are concerned with linguistic performance, whereas theoretical linguists are interested in describing and understanding linguistic competence.

### **Social Convention and Boundedness**

- Part of what is important to tease out between language conceptually and language socially is the idea that underlying cognitive rules

drive the creation of words and sentences, but social convention drives our interpretation of them. The relationship between a word and the thing represented by it is purely arbitrary and gets meaning only as part of collective agreement among speakers.

- For example, *dog* means ‘hairy, barking, four-legged creature’ only because the community of English speakers agrees on this sound representation for the concept. The fact that *chien* refers to this same concept in French shows that this relationship is arbitrary.
- Groups of speakers that share some sense of membership in a community have come to agree on the meaning associated with the term.
- Building on this idea of social consensus, another concept that is important in sociolinguistics is that of the boundedness of our social awareness. The idea here is that there are many things that surround us in our daily world, but we select only a portion of them as important in giving coherence to our experience. In other words, in making sense of our world, some facts are prioritized and others overlooked.
  - As we saw in our last lecture, some of this may be an inherent part of the language system we use—for example, whether or not we grammatically indicate what type of fit an object has, as Korean speakers do.
  - The facts selected as most vital to our sense of reality are also greatly determined by our cultural and institutional perspective. Again, like the arbitrary relation between a word and its concept, much of the determination of which facts are important is based on what our society directs us to look at.

### Speech Communities

- Linguists use the term *speech community* to refer to a group of people who interact linguistically and show agreement on social conventions. Such groups set themselves off uniquely from other groups in terms of both social and linguistic behavior.

- The term *speech community* has fuzzy boundaries. For example, we might say that we are members of an English-speaking speech community, but that would mean that we share norms with speakers of other varieties of English, such as Australian or British English. That's certainly true in some cases, but not all.
- Despite the fact that we can cast a wider net with the term, in this course, we will often use *speech community* to refer to a more local agreement on shared norms, such as those found in American English, that provide speakers with some sense of linguistic unity.
- The sense that linguists intend to convey by the term *speech community* is that certain collections of linguistic features often characterize the speech of people who interact frequently and have a sense of symbolic unity. Also important is the idea that these groups use sociolinguistic norms to contrast with others outside their groups.
- The notion of a speech community combines both social and linguistic aspects. This concept centers on the idea of a social unit with members that interact and, through prolonged interaction, construct a shared system of meaning socially and culturally. Crucially, speech communities often are made relevant mainly by their distinction from other communities. In addition, the notion of linguistic norms, or shared ideas about the typical forms and meanings of speech, are a key part of what binds and defines members of a speech community.
- In addition to this larger unit of social and linguistic organization, a related idea that is even more locally derived is that of a *community of practice*. We become involved in establishing *practice* by being involved in mutual enterprises and activities that reoccur and establish bonds between us, such as family traditions. Language is often a major part of such traditions, and we end up using this local experience to judge the ways others talk and interact and to identify others with similar practices as members of our communities.

- Thus, we see how the daily engagement of speakers actually helps construct the larger social and cultural values in which these interactions are embedded. In other words, our speech, encompassing differences in what we note as salient, the linguistic forms we choose to use, and the audience we identify, itself contributes to maintaining the larger social order.

### Suggested Reading

Finegan, “Languages and Linguistics.”

Morgan, “Speech Community.”

Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

### Questions to Consider

1. If you have ever spent much time around children, you are probably thankful that they quickly acquire language without much guided instruction. Think about how we typically instruct preschool-age children linguistically. How much of that instruction is content based (meanings) compared to structural (for example, how to form questions: *Why did you hit your brother on the head with a banana?*). When do we start to teach them the social meaning of words and sentences?
2. Starting from the idea that speech is both cognitive and social, consider how meaning change in aspects of our speech might be necessarily tied to both levels, as well. In other words, can we have linguistic change without a social consensus among a group of speakers?
3. Thinking about the two social units that have been widely studied in sociolinguistics introduced in this lecture, how might the idea of shared norms versus shared use change the way we delineate such groups? In other words, why does the concept of a speech community prioritize how we evaluate speech within our community rather than exclusively how we use it?



# Four Levels of Language Variation

## Lecture 4

Previously, we examined how communities of speakers build social meaning using some parts—but not others—of their linguistic endowment. Different groups vary in terms of which aspects of linguistic competence they use, with social facts playing a large role in determining what facets of their cognitive grammar are relevant in their speech. Individuals' speech also varies according to the norms of their more local communities. But before we delve too deeply into this relationship between variation and social identity, we first need to understand the different linguistic features that can be put to work by speakers. In this lecture, we will cover some of the linguistic levels affected by dialect variation, specifically, phonetics, phonology, syntax, and morphology.

### Phonetics and Phonology

- The areas of linguistics concerned with the sounds of language are *phonetics* and *phonology*. Though these two fields are related, phonetics centers on how sounds are actually produced.
  - An example of a phonetic difference might be the Southern pronunciation of the vowel in the words *tie* and *hide* as “ta:” and “ha:d.”
  - The Southern pronunciation of the /ay/ vowel is what is referred to by linguists as a *linguistic shibboleth*—a speech form that is recognizable as being associated with a particular type of speaker or as signaling a particular social identity. Though not all Southerners monophthongize the /ay/ vowel, no non-Southerners do; thus, it is a strongly identifying feature of Southern speech.
- *Phonology* is the area of linguistics that is concerned with how human speech sounds are organized into unique systems in language.

- An example of phonological organization would be the number of vowels used in different languages. For example, there are 5 vowel sounds in the vowel inventory of Japanese. Essentially, all words use one of those 5 vowels and no other vowel sounds. English, in contrast, has a large vowel inventory, essentially using 11 stressed vowels.
- One consequence of this difference is that a Japanese speaker must use one of the 5 Japanese vowel sounds to approximate English vowels when learning English words. This results in the substitution of the closest vowel from the Japanese system for the vowel the speaker lacks in the English system.
- The vowel sounds in *boot* and *book* are different for an English speaker, but this contrast does not exist in Japanese. Thus, when speaking English, a Japanese speaker will use the vowels in Japanese that are the closest-sounding approximates to the vowel sounds of English. Because this won't be equivalent to an English speaker, this difference will mark the Japanese speaker as a nonnative speaker of English.
- This is an example of how phonology can mark a difference between two languages. This difference may, in turn, be taken to suggest certain things socially about the speaker, such as level of cultural awareness and, in some cases, even competence. In reality, however, an adult learner of English is simply constrained by a first-language system that makes exact replication of the second language impossible.

### Spoken versus Written Language

- It's important to remember that linguistics is primarily concerned with spoken, not written, language and that this perspective results in different ways of understanding language variation.
- For example, most variation that we will discuss in the next few lectures will not have any correlate in the written form of the word. When speakers who pronounce "pin" and "pen" in the same way write these words down, they typically write

them as the rest of us do. As we will see, written language is tied into the norms associated with standard formal English, not the version we use in our day-to-day, face-to-face interactions.

- Throughout these lectures, we need to remind ourselves to think as we speak, not as we write, when discussing language variation.
- An important concept when talking about any level of linguistics is that of rules. We tend to think of writing as informing us of the rules of how to speak. But we had language skills long before we went to school and started writing. The type of rule system that drives our oral versus written knowledge of language is vastly different. For example, in phonology, the way we put sounds together is a strictly governed process regardless of which language or dialect we speak.



© monkeybusinessimages/Stock/Thinkstock

**Conventional grammar rules are useful because they enable writing to be understood across time and speakers, but there is no cognitive basis for grammar rules, as there is with linguistic rules.**

- Possible human speech sounds appear to be limited. On the one hand, we find similar sounds being used in most of the world's languages, such as /i/, /u/, /m/, and /k/. On the other hand, we produce many sounds, such as blowing or teeth-chattering, that have no linguistic meaning anywhere in the world. This suggests that sound selection in language is driven by cognitive and articulatory rules or preferences; it is not arbitrary.
- Further, we don't connect just any sounds together into syllables; there are many sound combinations that are never evidenced in human language. Even preliterate children know these types of rules and don't break them.
- These *linguistic rules* are different than social rules. Such rules as "Don't split infinitives" are social rules of grammar, not linguistic rules. And when you violate grammar rules, you do not violate the linguistic rules that stand behind the language we speak. Instead, you violate the conventional grammar rules that our educational and institutional systems have established as the social norm.
  - Linguists refer to this difference as the difference between prescriptive and descriptive rules. *Prescriptive rules* are those established by grammarians to control the output of speakers by assigning prestige or penalties based on the use or nonuse of prescribed language norms. *Descriptive rules* describe how language works and is used by speakers—what you already know unconsciously as a speaker of a human language.
  - Linguistics is a descriptive field; its goal is to explain the linguistic output of speakers in terms of what is possible and what is not possible in language based on empirical evidence. Although we will often discuss prescriptive rules and their interaction with language in society in these lectures, the linguistic rules we will discuss are those that are responsible for all languages and dialects we find in the world.
- It's important to note that every language and every dialect is systematic and rule governed, but rules driving dialects differ.

There can be a great deal of difference in rules between linguistic systems, say, between such languages as English and Arabic. Or there can be fewer and subtler differences between systems, such as those between British and American English or Southern and Northern English.

## Syntax

- *Syntax* is the study of sentence formation. In addition to knowing possible speech sounds, we also have knowledge of the structure of phrases, such as *across the floor* and *the giant rodent*, and sentences, such as *The giant rodent scurried across the floor*. Syntax is the toolkit that tells us what goes where and how.
- An important feature of syntax is *grammaticality judgment*. This is essentially native speaker intuition about what constitutes a “good” sentence in the language.
  - Obviously, not every sequence of words strung together is a possible sentence. For example, consider: *The runs a weedy already town the from*. Clearly, no one would say such a sentence, and no one would judge it to be a grammatical sentence of English.
  - Again, it is because of rules—both universal rules and language-specific rules—that we can make judgments about whether a sentence we hear or see is grammatical or not.
- Of course, different languages and even dialects have different rules that can apply to make sentences that would not be acceptable structures for another speaker. However, the “wrongness” of such a sentence as *He don’t do nothing* is a different kind of wrong than the sentence above, which a listener cannot even process.
- The possible variation in syntactic structures is constrained by the possibilities allowed by our universal grammar. Although multiple negation is a socially dispreferred structure in standard English, it is a perfectly fine structure in terms of following linguistic rules.

## Morphology

- *Morphology* is the study of how words are formed and created. In this field, linguists look at slang or novel words, such as *Google*, *bling*, or *blog*, which actually follow specific word formation rules. Some words seem to be formed through “regular” processes, while others seem to be exceptions or “irregular” (for example, *dog/dogs* versus *tooth/teeth*, *jogged* versus *ran*). Most of these irregular forms are remnants from older forms of English, when the language had a much more complicated verb and noun class system.
- New words, when they enter the language through borrowing or through invention, are also subject to linguistic rules. When a new word, such as *Google*, enters the language, it belongs to a particular category, in this case, a verb. Thus, by default, English speakers understand that to form the past tense, we add *-ed*, and to form the progressive, we add *-ing*. We are also able to make the word into a noun by adding a “noun-type” ending; for example, one who Googles may be called a *Googler*.
- We can be quite creative with new words but only insofar as is allowed by our linguistic constraints on word formation. For example, no English speaker would form the past tense of *Google* as *Gaggle* per the *sing/sang* or *ring/rang* model. These are not productive rules of English morphology and, unless someone is being purposefully atypical, would simply not morphologically occur anymore.
- As with phonology and syntax, morphology is also an area where languages and dialects can differ substantially. Many languages use more affixes than English does to express meaning, and sometimes, these take the form of infixes (breaking up the base) or circumfixes (encircling a base). This is not something we find in English unless we count slang expressions, such as *I guaran-damn-tee it!*
- Languages and dialects can also differ in simply what is selected to be encoded as a *morpheme* (meaning unit) and what is not. In Chinese, the past tense is not grammaticized as a separate word

but instead is interpretable from other linguistic and pragmatic contextual cues. In other words, unlike in English, it is not mandatory to add something like *-ed* or *-ing* on the end of a word to communicate past tense.

- Our language can and does vary substantially on a number of different levels simultaneously. When morphology is combined with phonetics, phonology, and syntax, we have a powerful set of tools for performing both linguistic and social work with our speech.

### Suggested Reading

Fridland, “‘Tie, Tied and Tight.’”

O’Grady, et al., *Contemporary Linguistics*.

Pinker, *The Language Instinct*.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, “Levels of Linguistics,” in *American English*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Try to come up with at least two examples of variations in phonology, syntax, and morphology that you have encountered when meeting people with different language or dialect backgrounds.
2. Consider why your response to people using nonstandard forms is typically that they are “incorrect” rather than simply using a different dialect form. Think about how this might instead be signaling social status distinctions that often reflect group identity and access to education.
3. Would the fact that a form is widely used in a standard dialect elsewhere (for example, the loss of pre-vocalic /r/ [“pahk” for *park*, “cah” for *car*] in Received Pronunciation in Britain) alter how you perceive this form used in a nonstandard dialect in the United States?

4. Come up with new words in English (for example, *masflott*: the hole that develops in your socks where your big toe is). Can you see evidence of rules at work in your construction of such words? For example, if two of your socks had such holes, would you have two *masflotts*?



# How Do Dialects Develop?

## Lecture 5

In this course, we are looking broadly at how languages serve significant social, as well as linguistic, purposes. A crucial part of this effort is to define the object of our study: language. Along with *dialect*, *language* is a common term that all of us use and think we understand. But as we'll see, we don't have clear-cut criteria for differentiating a language from a dialect, and the terms themselves have multiple meanings. In this lecture, we will try to define *language* and *dialect* and try to understand the role of society in distinguishing between the two. We'll also look at the numerous factors that play a role in the development of a dialect from a language.

### Defining *Language*

- The term *language*, used generally, often means something like “a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which we communicate.” This is the meaning we intend when we make such statements as “True language is unique to humans.” But *language* can also refer to specific kinds of codes used by groups of speakers, such as the Chinese language or the English language. When used in this sense, the term refers to a particular organization of linguistic rules that uniquely defines the communicative competence of a particular group of speakers.
- To illustrate how linguistic rules differ across languages and how linguists define language groups, let's look at some of the differences between English and Mandarin Chinese.
  - Morphologically, Chinese is an *isolating language*, while English is an *inflecting* or *fusional language*. The main difference here is that English uses prefixation and suffixation to tack on additional meaning; Chinese uses word order, adverbials, or the specific speaking context rather than inflections.

- The difference in how the two languages form questions also sets them apart linguistically. English uses a *transformational rule* to indicate a question versus a statement. An auxiliary verb is moved to the front of a sentence (*Did you want to eat that?*) or a question word is inserted, then the auxiliary is moved (*What did you want to eat?*). Chinese either inserts a question particle or indicates the question with a repetition and negation of the verb.
- The particular collection of linguistic parameters that each language uses essentially defines that language uniquely as a recognizable system. Thus, we could say that *language*, in this sense, is a cover term for a unique set of linguistic rules. This is usually the meaning we intend when we ask what language someone speaks.
- However, in many cases, when we use the word *language*, we are drawing attention to the way an individual or a group of speakers uses that particular code. For instance, when we say, “Oh, he can barely speak the language,” or “Excuse my language,” we mean something more akin to recognizing a standard form of a language compared to a nonstandard form.
- It is this kind of reference to language that sociolinguists are often most interested in. This view of language includes the recognition that language is not just a set of cognitive rules but an evolving social entity.

### Defining *Dialect*

- Dialects and languages may share common developmental histories, but some linguistic changes over time result in entirely new languages, while others result in different varieties of the same language. In some cases, systems that are linguistically very similar, such as Swedish and Norwegian, are considered separate languages. Other systems that are much more linguistically divergent, such as Mandarin and Cantonese, are viewed as different dialects of the same language. Thus, we need to make a distinction between the terms *language* and *dialect*.

- We typically think of language differences as somehow larger than dialect differences. We tend to think that people who speak different languages are unable to understand one another, while we think of different dialects in the same language as being mutually intelligible.
  - We might say, then, that speakers of the same language are those who share a common code, while those who can't understand one another must speak separate languages. Unfortunately, by this definition, what we typically call Chinese is actually several different languages.
  - Further, many languages, such as Hindi and Urdu, should actually be considered the same language even though their speakers would probably not agree. There is much more to how we define language than shared linguistic properties in the system itself. Historical, geopolitical, and religious factors often come into play.
- When considering dialects, most people probably come up with examples of people speaking different versions of the same language, such as British English and American English. However, using this definition presumes that the dialects are mutually intelligible and that we have some clear linguistic criteria for how much systems can vary and still be “the same.”
  - Again, we see examples that make such a simple definition problematic. Mandarin and Cantonese are dialects that, at least as spoken, are not mutually intelligible and are linguistically quite distinct. In contrast, Serbian and Croatian are much more likely to be understood by speakers of either language and share more linguistic features.
  - There's a necessary social component to why we consider Chinese dialects to be the same language but Hindi and Urdu to be separate languages. Political power and historical facts play a large role in the development of languages and dialects. Indeed, religious, political, and economic facts are often the key determinants of a language versus a dialect. Thus, to make



**In the history of the United States, the North came to have a more urban ecology and denser population centers, from which changes in speech emerged.**

the distinction between languages and dialects, we need to consider the social, political, and historical facts from which different systems emerged.

### **Social and Linguistic Factors in Language Development**

- In Modern English, we have both regionally and socially based dialects. Underlying both types are internal (cognitive/physiological) reasons and external (social) reasons that motivate the development of dialects.
- Dialects are most likely to develop where we find separation among groups of speakers. This separation can be geographic or, more commonly, social. The key is that any time distance is created or maintained among speakers, linguistic differences will arise that work in tandem with social distinctions to contribute to dialect divergence.

- Among the key factors that give rise to dialects are initial settlement patterns.
  - Typically, a group, such as the Pilgrims, arrives in a new region, bringing its unique cultural and language identity. Then, the group establishes a cohesive society and a new cultural identity. Usually, this breaks down or shifts old patterns and culture, as new experiences and new members change old behaviors and orientation. In addition, this new culture often supplants whatever native culture or identity was originally in the area.
  - Once established, this new regional system defines itself with regard to a larger system of national culture. For example, the North and the South in the United States both have shared and distinct cultural identities.
  - The original settlers generally create cultural and linguistic areas that persist over time; this is what is known as the *founder's effect*. Although many things about the culture may change, the original demarcation of different cultural and linguistic areas within a nation is retained. For example, plantation structure in the South had a strong cultural and linguistic effect on speech in that region.
- Continuing the influence of initial settlement, migratory routes also play a role in the development of dialect patterns. Dialect boundaries spread out along major migratory routes from population centers.
- Of course, geographic factors—large physical barriers, such as rivers, mountains, and oceans—also play a major role in the development of dialects. Geography serves to physically separate groups of speakers, creating a situation where languages develop differences within each group that differ from changes taking place in other groups.
- Another factor in the development of dialects is language contact. In some cases, one language can have such widespread influence over another that it doesn't characterize specific dialects, such

as French on English after the Norman invasion. Alternatively, a certain area where a language is spoken may have intensive contact with a community where another language is spoken. This linguistic interaction may influence the development of a dialect characterized by contact with that language/culture, such as Cajun English from contact with Cajun French.

- A fifth factor driving the development of dialects is economic ecology. In other words, dialect formation is dependent not just on how often people come in contact but on the type of contact that is involved. For example, how one makes a living can strongly influence the development of dialects. Not only does it lead to specialized vocabulary, but it may also influence patterns of interaction and cultural preferences among speakers that foster the development of dialect features.
- A sixth factor is social stratification. Social groups often engage in both linguistic and cultural behaviors that serve to segregate them from each other. The power of upward mobility and the local currency gained through vernacular use can be strong factors in language change and dialect development.
- Finally, communication networks and group reference are strong influences on dialect development.
  - *Communication networks* refers to patterns of interaction in communities. We talk most like those we interact with on a daily basis and in many different contexts.
  - *Group reference* refers to the adoption of certain linguistic behaviors that serve to identify speakers of a particular group as being unique or having a particular identity.
- However, even in the absence of social factors, languages still evolve in distinct ways. Typically, it is underlying cognitive and physiological pressures that result in changes to our language system; how these are realized varies based on the geographical and social factors discussed above. These cognitive and physiological

pressures include such phenomena as rule extension, analogy, reduction of linguistic redundancy, and changes in pronunciation of sounds over time.

- Language changes constantly as a result of internal and external pressures, and groups of speakers may develop certain features while other groups develop different ones. This is what leads to differences in how sounds, words, or sentences are constructed across groups that share a common tongue. Over time, these differences can become greater as groups become more socially or geographically dispersed, and in this way, dialect differences can eventually branch off into different languages.
- As long as speakers settle, migrate, work, and maintain social and geographic distance, we will find the same pressures at work. Similarly, our cognitive and physiological capacities are not likely to change much in the foreseeable future. Thus, it is a good bet that our descendants will speak a much different tongue than we do today.

### Suggested Reading

Bromhard, “Do All Languages Come from the Same Source?”

Childs, “What’s the Difference between Dialects and Languages?”

Crystal, *A Little Book of Language*.

*Ethnologue*, <http://www.ethnologue.com/>.

Lewis, “How Many Languages Are There in the World?”

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the idea of inherent variability coexist with our sense of the timelessness of written language? Why might this contribute to our sense that the written word is somehow less transient and corruptible than the spoken?

2. The development history of most languages has been reconstructed back to hypothesized “proto” languages, such as Proto-Indo-European for English. However, several languages are still mysteries in terms of where they came from, showing few or no traceable relative languages. Investigate the language family story for unusual languages, such as Basque and Korean, that appear to be anomalous developments in their regions.



# Language Change—What's New Is Old Again

## Lecture 6

**A**lready in this course, we've discussed the types of variation found in Modern English, and we've seen that variation can take many forms and can mark different aspects of our social identities. But was language always so variable? In fact, the changes in our language that are occurring today are just small ones when compared to some of the changes that have taken place over its history. In this lecture, we will review the history of the English language. As we progress through the centuries, we'll note how this history confirms some of the key ideas we've learned so far. We'll also see that it suggests some general principles about the ongoing interplay between language and society.

### Old English

- The period of Old English began with the withdrawal of the Roman legionnaires from Britain in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., where they had been protecting the native Celts from barbarian invasions. In their absence, the Celts fell victim to numerous savage attacks from the Picts and the Scots, leaving little Celtic inheritance in Modern English.
- The fate of Modern English was determined, instead, by groups of Germanic-speaking invaders who arrived starting about 449 A.D. from the European continent. These seafaring mercenaries included a number of tribes, chiefly, the Angles, Jutes, Saxons, and a bit later, Frisians.
- These invading groups, mainly from the great north German plain, spoke related but distinct Germanic dialects. They eventually settled in different areas of Britain, giving rise to the main dialect areas of Old English: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. Modern English began in part as a descendant of Mercian, which was an Anglian dialect of this period.



© finastique/Stock/Thinkstock

Celtic festivals are held throughout America, but little Celtic influence is found in Modern English; instead, the Celtic language survives mainly in Scots-Gaelic and Irish today.

- Though very little of our contemporary word stock derived from this period, some of our most important and widely used words, such as *you*, *is*, and *the*, are of Anglo-Saxon origin. Unlike Modern English, Old English had many fewer foreign loan words, with much of its word stock Germanic in origin. This at least partially explains why the meaning of *Beowulf* is lost to us if we hear it or see it written in Old English.
- Less bloody but still influential on our modern tongue were the Viking invasions around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the previous invaders, the Vikings were not as successful in overtaking Britain. Instead, they settled—relatively peacefully—in the north of England. Originally speakers of Old Norse, the Vikings more or less assimilated to existing local culture and language. Old Norse contributed to the development of Old English by adding vocabulary. In addition, contact with Old Norse began the long process of simplifying the complex inflectional system of Old English.

- The next important social event marking a massive shift in the development of English was the Norman invasion in 1066. This invasion brought French to the land, replacing English as the language at court.
  - Because English was primarily spoken by the lower classes during this period, the progress of linguistic change was less hindered by the norms of the ruling elite.
  - It's important to note that it is typically the language of lower-status speakers that introduces innovations and new variants into a language. Without the pressure of higher-status speakers resisting incoming changes or written documents codifying certain practices, these innovations proceed more or less unchecked.

### **The Shift from Old English to Middle English**

- A marked shift leading to the Middle English period occurred when sound changes merged a number of vowel sounds toward the schwa sound when they were in unstressed syllables. This caused many of the endings to sound alike, and over time, this change led to the loss of most of the unaccented case and gender inflections that had existed in Old English.
- To keep meaning intact, the change in pronunciation in Old English also caused a shift in other aspects of English. For example, word order became much more fixed toward the Modern period because endings no longer indicated the function of a word in a sentence. In addition, Old English did not have many function words, such as auxiliary verbs or prepositions, because again, endings did most of the grammatical work. When inflectional information was eliminated, other methods of indicating case, tense, and other sentential relations became necessary.
- In addition to grammatical and phonological changes to English, the influence of French, particularly on our word stock, was vast. Thousands of words we find in English today were borrowed from French during the time of Norman rule, including *govern*, *prison*,

*judge, army, dance, and fashion.* French phonology also introduced sounds previously not meaningful in English, such as the distinction between /f/ and /v/.

## Middle English

- Altogether, these social and linguistic changes altered the shape of Old English so much that the period beginning with the Norman Conquest became known as the Middle English period, spanning roughly from 1100 to 1500 A.D.
- During the Middle English period, as today, there were a number of regional dialects, including Northern, West Midland, East Midland, Southern, and Kentish. It was also during the Middle English period that the seat of political power shifted from Wessex to London.
- The Middle English period ended, not because of any invasions, but simply in response to drastic pronunciation changes, especially to the vowel system. Moreover, it was around 1500, at the end of the Middle English period, that the London dialect rose to prominence. London's East Midland dialect ended up spawning Modern English.
  - London had long been a commercial and cultural center in Britain; thus, its emergence as a linguistic model is not surprising. In addition, the rise of the merchant class and London's proximity to Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge gave London the sociocultural edge, and its dialect became prestigious.
  - Part of the influence of the London dialect also came about when William Caxton introduced the printing press to England in 1476 and used London pronunciations as the basis for his spelling. Printed texts became much more prevalent and literacy increased, establishing the London norm more widely.
  - This essentially started the process of codification of "standard" English based on the London dialect and established the sense of a national standard language. As a result, by the year 1500 or so, English moved into its Early Modern period.

## Early Modern English

- During the Early Modern period, the effects of the Great Vowel Shift radically altered how vowels sounded. Our modern pronunciation is in large part the result of this massive vowel shift.
- We can also thank the Great Vowel Shift for our bewildering modern spelling system. Although the vowel shift affected how we actually say words, it was not used as the basis for our spelling, which is still based on pre-vowel shift pronunciations. Unfortunately, printers and scholars from the Early Modern era preferred archaic spelling. Thus, the modern vowel pronunciations and the loss of endings were not reflected in many of the printed and written materials produced at the time.
- During the Early Modern period, spelling was still not highly standardized. A number of factors, though, influenced the move toward the recognition of a standard form of English and the selection of London's East Midland dialect as the model.



**During the Middle English period, writers typically wrote in their local dialects; because Chaucer's dialect was East Midland, his work is more comprehensible to us than works written in other dialects of the period.**

- In the early 1400s, the Chancery clerks in Westminster, who created the administrative documents for the English Crown, developed a set of uniform written practices to follow.
- In addition, William Caxton used spelling conventions in printing based on the dialect of London, though he often preferred older forms.
- Finally, the growth of the merchant class in London and the prestige of the city attracted more people to the area and its speech.

### Modern English

- Modern English is, in many ways, a result of war, colonization, and social and economic prominence. Sociohistorical events played a significant role in defining how we speak today.
- Ironically, the concerns we often hear today about the decline of Modern English are several centuries too late. If language change means decay, we really should have been worried from the Old English to the Middle English period. The changes that brought us to Modern English were not nearly as drastic, and the Modern period since about 1800 has seen relative stability.
- As discussed earlier, language can change because of internal cognitive or physiological pressures. Further, we often see large-scale linguistic changes occur because of social pressures—language contact, social or geographic isolation, and class differences. This basic tendency toward change in language is known as *inherent variability*.
- In our last lecture, we discussed social factors, such as migration, settlement, geography, group reference, and social class, as significant factors in dialect development. Looking at our own dialect's history, we can see that these are exactly the factors responsible for how we speak today.

- The Angles, Jutes, and Saxons migrated and settled in a new land, Britain. They brought their native tongue with them, integrating some Celtic words and developing a new cultural area that persisted through time.
- The invaders' dialects showed the effects of geographic separation from other speakers who remained on the European continent. These dialects also diverged through further language contact with and borrowings from new groups, such as the Scandinavians and the French. And internal migration led to emergent differences and innovations, resulting in several distinct Old English dialect areas.
- Class stratification and group reference factors also took their turn in the historical development of English. During French rule, the separation of languages by the French ruling elite and the English-speaking commoners led to changes in phonological, lexical, and grammatical patterns. With the return of English as the language of the land, we see the effects of class and group reference as the language continued to develop through the Middle English period.
- The rise of the East Midland dialect and its shaping influence on Early Modern English was a reflection of its use by those in power around the affluent urban center of London. The 18<sup>th</sup> century, with its sense of language purity and its association of crass and vulgar language with the lower classes, played a role in cementing the prescriptive grammar that would influence standard English dialects for years to come.
- Thus, the forces that forged our dialect have changed little across time. The journey of English into a new world, with the settlement of America and the separation from British English, reflects many of the same pressures as those affecting Old, Middle, and Early Modern English.

## Suggested Reading

Aitchison, *Language Change*.

Pyles and Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*.

Roberts, “A Brief History of English.”

## Questions to Consider

1. Compare a copy of the Lord’s Prayer in Old English, Middle English, and Modern English. (See, for example, <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/history/paternoster.html>). How well can you understand any of the words in Old English? How about Middle English? Do you notice any systematic differences in phonology, grammar, or vocabulary in the three passages? For example, consider the representation of sounds in Old English compared to Middle and Modern English.
2. If you have studied German, does the grammatical gender and inflectional system in Old English seem more similar to Modern German than to Modern English?
3. If you encountered *Beowulf* or Chaucer in high school or college, what do you remember about how these texts were presented and portrayed? Both were written in periods where dialects rather than a standard guided written documents. Does this change how you would view them in terms of representing “correct” language?
4. Where do you weigh in on the process of language change? Are you of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mindset that there was once a “purer” form of our language that has decayed, or is language, like many other aspects of life, always evolving? What leads you to this perspective?



# The Origin and History of American Dialects

## Lecture 7

In an earlier lecture, we looked at some of the factors that drive dialect change, and in our last lecture, we saw those factors at work in the history of English. As we discovered, the English we speak today has been heavily influenced by the migrations, invasions, and language purity efforts of earlier eras. However, we stopped our history before crossing the Atlantic. As you can imagine, there is much yet to say about the development of English in America, and in this lecture, we will see what has become of our native tongue since the arrival of the Pilgrims in the New World.

### English in the New World

- Differences in initial settlement by speakers of different British dialects had a substantial effect on regional differences in America. In 17<sup>th</sup>-century Britain, the time of much migration to the New World, there were still significant differences in the British source dialects. Groups of settlers from these dialect areas brought these differences to the New World. As these groups settled in various regions of the United States, they provided the foundations for the main regional distinctions found today in America.
- When separated from other speakers of a source language, dialects often retain different features of the originating dialects over time.
  - An example of this would be the way we pronounce the vowel in such words as *after*, *laugh*, or *glass* in American English compared to the British English “broad a” pronunciation.
  - Most Americans say these words with the /æ/ vowel: “æfter,” “lægh,” and “glæss.” This probably reflects the same pronunciation that was found in prerevolutionary Britain, not the standard pronunciation of /ah/ in these words that has since developed in British English: “ahfter,” “lahgh,” and “glahss.”

- The retention of features from originating dialects represents the long reach of the founder's effect. However, it is also the case that American English and British English have diverged since their split. Innovations unrelated to relic features occur differently in each separated group; thus, a shift that occurs after the separation of two groups of dialect speakers will most likely not occur similarly for both groups.

### Early Settlers in America

- Records documenting early migration to America are quite sparse, but we have some basic idea of who settled where. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, southeastern British speakers founded a number of settlements in coastal New England and along the central Atlantic coast. Northern English and Scots-Irish settlers tended to settle in western New England. The Scots-Irish also frequently settled in upper New York and Appalachia. In addition, northern and western Brits settled in New Jersey and Delaware.
- Beyond British settlement, a bit later, a sizeable number of German immigrants arrived in southeastern Pennsylvania. This region's speech also shows Scots-Irish influence, reflecting the early Scots-Irish settlement in this area. These two founding groups were crucial to the development of what linguists call the *Midland* or *Heartland dialect*, which refers to a region stretching from Pennsylvania, west through Ohio, and on to eastern Nebraska.
- Early settlers in the South differed in a number of ways from settlers elsewhere. Unlike East Coast immigrants, Southern gentry tended to educate their children in England; thus, their speech was more likely to carry back innovations from later periods in British English. In addition, although East Coast labor was provided by white indentured servants, black slaves filled that role in the South. These differences had an impact in the development of Southern speech.
- Our ancestors were both linguistically diverse and influential. But their experiences and migratory patterns once in America also led to innovative and distinct linguistic forms. Gradually, dialects in

America became defining of regional and social differences within the country, not simply a marker of linguistic origins.

### The Study of American Dialects

- In the 1960s and 1970s, Frederic Cassidy began work on the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*; the fifth and final volume of this vast undertaking was published in 2012. Numerous other linguistic atlas projects have also been undertaken, including the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, edited by Hans Kurath in the 1940s, and *The Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States*, edited by Lee Pederson in the 1970s.
- Dialect geography is part of a long tradition born out of the field of historical linguistics, which is the study of how languages change over time. In early dialect research, the main goal was to establish American dialect patterns, isolate regional differences, and record relic features.
  - Essentially, early dialect geographers wanted to examine how time and space precipitate language change. Driven by this interest, most early geographers measured the use of lexical items, such as *skillet* versus *frying pan*, and mapped the particular patterns of use geographically.
  - The resulting dialect atlases show the boundaries of the distribution of a particular lexical form on a map. Typically, dialect geographers incorporate only time and distance as factors in language change. In other words, any variation in related dialects or languages should be able to be accounted for by those factors alone.
  - The goal for most dialect geographers is to produce a dialect atlas, a collection of maps of various features or forms used by different speakers. Differences in forms of a word (e.g., Northern “greasy” versus Southern “greazy”) are typically found to be dependent on some geographical or historical factor. Where such differences are found, a line called an *isogloss* is drawn on a map, marking the difference geographically.

- Although individual isoglosses are sometimes a bit haphazard, it is often the case that areas with similar histories also show like usage of numerous terms. Where many isoglosses coincide geographically (an *isogloss bundle*), a dialect boundary is delimited.
- Several dialect projects in America have given us a glance at the settlement and spread of dialect features in the United States. Of particular importance, three major American regional areas—Northern, Midland, and Southern dialects—emerged based on isogloss bundling of lexical differences.

### Models of Dialect Diffusion

- In addition to tracing the history of dialect forms, one of the questions dialect geographers consider is how such dialect features spread. A number of different models have been proposed.
- The first of these is the *wave model*, which assumes that the spread of change is a function of geographic space and time. Changes are initiated in a particular geographic area at a certain point in time, and those changes then spread outward in progressive waves. This model identifies three key areas: the focal area (where innovations start and spread), transition areas (where newer and older variants coexist), and relic areas (which are resistant to innovations).
  - Typically, dialect geography has focused on the wave model to account for the majority of regional differences, but it is important to note that diffusion of change is a function of both geographic and social space.
  - Changes generally start specifically in one social group in a geographic space and spread through the social classes, even as the change spreads geographically. We also find that urban and rural areas exhibit different patterns of usage and that changes tend to spread based on population factors.
- The *gravity model* of diffusion attempts to account for population factors. This model sees dialect change as a function not only of the



**The gravity model assumes that changes are most likely to begin in large urban areas and spread first to other urban areas; rural areas are typically affected last, if at all.**

distance from one point to another but of the population density of areas that stand to be affected. The gravity model assumes that cities act as focal points for cultural change and have communication networks that foster the development of innovations. Differences in ideology, settlement, and interests make urban and rural areas less likely to share linguistic changes.

- We also find that it is not simply urban-versus-rural contrasts or population density that triggers and diffuses linguistic changes in particular ways; social networks also play a large role in disseminating change. In the *social network* model of change, we find that dialect change is diffused by people with loose social networks—those with ties to many social groups but strong ties to none.

## Linguistic Variables

- Today's sociolinguists are interested in modern influences on speech in America, influences often found in large urban areas and attributable to social distinctions not easily measured using dialect geography methodology.
  - Although dialect atlases focus on the use of variants across geographic space, dialectologists are more focused today on examining the use of variants across social space—for example across age, class, and ethnicity—within the same locale.
  - This shift in research focus has brought a corresponding methodological shift. Contemporary language researchers must find a way to look at the systematic variation occurring in all types of communities and to take a more scientific, sociologically oriented approach to language differences and language change.
  - This brings us to the concept of a *linguistic variable*, which enables researchers to perform extremely sensitive analyses of differences among speakers within the same community.
- A linguistic variable is a linguistic item with identifiable variants (minimally two). For example, the *in/ing* variation we discussed earlier is an example of a linguistic variable. The linguistic meaning doesn't change, but often, a distinct social meaning becomes attached to each variant.
- With the use of linguistic variables in determining linguistic variation, we can move away from a lexically based measure of dialect differences to examine how phonological, syntactic, and morphological variables are used by regions and by speakers within each region.
- *The Atlas of North American English*, published in 2006, uses this new conceptual framework to examine how a number of linguistic variables relate to social variation. Instead of looking at individual vocabulary items, this atlas uses vowel measurements, such as the

degree of /æ/ raising, across dialects as a gauge of dialect and social differences.

- Using the concept of the linguistic variable and its typical focus on phonological or morpho-syntactic features bypasses the problem that vocabulary can be a relatively superficial level of dialect difference. In addition, an atlas based on linguistic variables is able to trace the effects of gender, ethnicity, age, and class on the variables it identifies and records. Such atlases can also make predictions, based on how features spread in and across social groups, about the future of dialect features in American English.
- Using this new conceptual tool of the linguistic variable, we can identify how social isolation and social networks interact with and determine the development and spread of dialect features. Taken together, dialect geography and new methods illustrate how linguistic variation is a product of both geographic and social space.

### Suggested Reading

Hazen, Butcher, and King, “Unvernacular Appalachia.”

Labov, Ash, and Boberg, “The Restoration of Post-Vocalic /r/,” in *The Atlas of North American English*.

Language Samples Project, *Varieties of English*, <http://ic-migration.webhost.uits.arizona.edu/icfiles/ic/lsp/site/>.

*Linguistic Atlas Project*, <http://www.lap.uga.edu/>.

Metcalf, *How We Talk*.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, “Dialects in the United States,” in *American English*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Which of the following mergers, if any, do you find in your speech (or in the speech of friends or relatives that will let you listen to their vowels): *cot/caught*, *merry/Mary/marry*, *pin/pen*, *pool/pull*, *horse/hoarse*? All of these are mergers found in American English from what were once traditionally separate vowel classes. *Cot/caught* is found in Western speech but is also found in some areas of the Midland and South. *Pin/pen*, of course, is found mainly in Southern and African-American dialects. Some Westerners merge *pool* and *pull*. Do any of these surprise you? Most dialect regions now merge *merry/Mary/marry* and *horse/hoarse*, though all of them were once pronounced as separate vowel classes. Do you know anyone who says these differently?
2. Consider where your parents were from and where you were raised. Are there any features of their speech (or yours) that you now realize are actually indicative of regional features rather than just variable pronunciations (for example, *highway/freeway*, *soda/pop/coke*, *hoagie/hero/grinder*, *quarter to/of/til*).
3. Research your area at a local historical society or through a book on local history. What language groups made up the majority of immigrants into your area? How have they affected speech in the region?
4. What influence do you see in your local area or state of any indigenous languages that might once have been or still are present? Are there geographic or place names that might preserve this history?



# Your Shifty Vowels

## Lecture 8

**A**lmost all major dialects of American English are undergoing massive changes in their vowels. These changes differ from region to region and among ethnic and age groups in different regions. Because most of the people we talk to speak the same dialect we do, we notice differences only when they are unusual to us. These latest vowel shifts are not the first to affect English, but they certainly represent some of the most striking changes to our speech in quite some time. Perhaps most surprisingly, American speech is becoming less similar, not more similar, regionally. In this lecture, we'll explore how vowel articulation comes to mark social differences, and we'll learn about vowel production.

### Modern Vowel Shifts

- Linguists have been studying vowel movements, often referred to as *vowel shifts*, since isolated vowel changes were first noted in the 1970s. However, the extensive and interrelated shifts that we currently recognize in U.S. dialects were not really identified until the early 1990s as interrelated shift patterns. We also find that Canada is being affected by vowel shifts that are different than those in the United States.
- We often think of regionally diagnostic terms or words as the main markers of where a person is from—such terms as *y'all* versus *youse guys* or *soda* versus *pop*. However, vowel pronunciation actually plays a more extensive role in making someone sound like a Southerner, Westerner, or Northerner than we tend to think. Despite this, we are rarely able to articulate exactly what the differences in vowel sounds are.
- Although speech samples from speakers in different parts of the country sound different, pinpointing specifically what differs among them is difficult. You might notice a particular word or two

that stand out as distinctive, but it isn't the word that's different; it's the way the vowels in it sound.

- Obvious markers of region, such as *y'all* or *totally rad*, make a clear social claim. Vowel sounds, in contrast, are typically below the level of conscious awareness. Changes in vowel sounds are not usually even noticed by those shifting them. Eventually, when we meet people outside of our dialect region that don't shift in the same way, we may notice that they pronounce their vowels strangely, but we probably don't realize that they are thinking the same thing about us.
- Vowel shifts can progress rapidly across age, gender, and regional groups without meeting the social roadblocks that many more obvious language differences meet. For example, you don't usually hear people comment on the way someone else pronounces his or her vowels, but the substitution of /v/ for /th/ or the deletion of an /r/ (as in "brovah" instead of "brother") is often seen as salient.

### Vowel Articulation

- Why is it that vowel articulation is so much more subtle yet makes such a difference?
  - Vowel sounds are produced along somewhat of a continuum in the mouth. There are fuzzy areas between what constitutes different vowel qualities for speakers in different regions.
  - We can make an /æ/ sound (as in *cat*) either raised ("ce-æt") or retracted ("cuht") but still have someone understand that we are saying *cat*. We then start to identify this subtle variation with social distinctions.
  - For example, if Great Aunt Mary says "caht" while our children say "ce-æt," this distinction may come to signal age differences when we hear it, even though we may not recognize it consciously. Yet again, we see how language—in this case, vowel articulation—subtly indicates and reinforces social categories—in this case, old versus young.

- In contrast to other speech sounds, vowels vary quite a bit, and this variation provides us with an effective yet still linguistically comprehensible way to recognize social differences.
  - Though there is some variation in how they are produced, consonants are less variable than vowels. In general, to make a consonant sound, you have to hit specific targets in a particular way.
  - Vowels are a more relational kind of articulation. If you make a vowel sound a bit higher or lower in the mouth compared to someone else, it doesn't matter so much as long as you are making it distinct from other vowel sounds. This continuous rather than clear-cut distinction between vowel sounds makes it harder to recognize exactly how the sound is different unless you are linguistically trained.
  - But these subtle differences that simply develop through shared use by a regional or ethnic group are then identified as social indicators. Again, as we've been exploring with language development more generally, we see that our speech is a result of both social and linguistic pressures that are a reflection of where we come from and who we speak with most.

### **Vowel Normalization and Social Differences**

- Vowels are essentially created by vibrations within the vocal tract; thus, the size of the vocal tract makes a difference in terms of the frequencies produced by the shaping of the airflow through it. The process people use to understand another speaker's vowels when they sound different is *vowel normalization*.
  - Normalization processes seem to be most efficient when there is *talker familiarity*. That means that the more you hear a particular speaker, the quicker and more efficiently you normalize his or her speech. This is the reason you understand the speech of those you talk to most often more readily than those with whom you may not have much experience speaking.

- Normalization may make it seem that variations in vowel sounds are not very significant—because listeners are able to accommodate for them. But when an entire group or community starts to vary its vowel production in the same way over time, then the target for that vowel for children may become shifted toward a new norm.
- The community as a whole changes in a linguistically patterned way that opens up the opportunity for that shift to become a marker of a particular social identity. Speakers outside that community don't shift consistently or at all toward the new target, leading to a potentially socially significant difference among groups of speakers.
- Why might people start to produce a sound in a systematically different way than they originally heard it? It seems that young people are the crucial link in introducing innovations into a community's speech.
  - Adolescence favors social forces beyond class, including the need for autonomy and independence. These are forces that are often not as relevant as we age. Although adults are economically status conscious, teenagers are status conscious based on other factors. Athletic ability, urbanness, coolness—all these are critical during maturation, as is the need to express separation from adult norms.
  - These factors, it seems, help drive vowel changes, among other types of changes. We will explore more about language and youth in a later lecture, but we typically find that it is younger people who are most advanced in sound changes entering a community.
- If several communities adopt new norms for vowel production over time—and do so in different ways—we end up with socially diagnostic vowels indicative of membership in those communities. This is exactly what seems to be happening in regional U.S. dialects

today. At the same time, some of the new positions for other vowels in American English seem to be in the process of *dialect leveling*, or losing local differentiation.

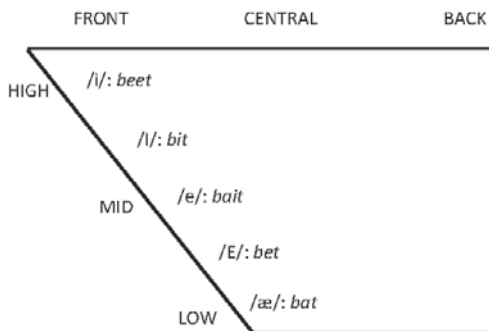
- Because the same vowel sounds reoccur in many of the words we use, any shift in vowel pronunciation generally affects the way we say all words containing that vowel sound. A shift in our vowels can, thus, drastically change a language over time.

## Vowel Production

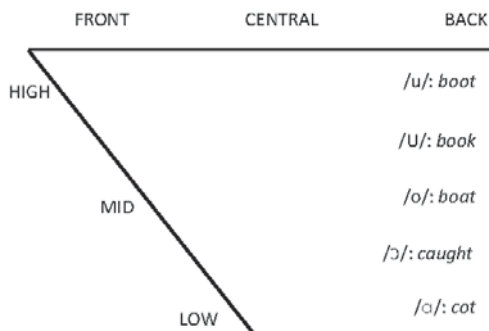
- Most American dialects have about 11 single vowel sounds and 3 main diphthongs, although this inventory varies a bit depending on a speaker's dialect and on what is counted as a separate vowel sound. These sounds are made by moving the tongue front and back and up and down and by rounding or spreading the lips. These movements create different shapes in the mouth, which in turn create different resonances in the airflow that we hear as different vowel sounds. This is what linguists refer to as *vowel qualities*.
- When discussing how we make vowel sounds, we typically refer to a number of concurrent factors: tongue position (front or back of the tongue lifted high, mid, or low in the mouth), jaw position (opened or closed), and lip position (rounded or spread). The movements of the tongue and lips work together to essentially make a tube. Air moving through vibrates at different resonances, depending on the shape made with this tube. Different shapes create different vowel sounds.
- We can more easily understand how these elements work together by thinking about how vowel sounds are produced in the mouth. Linguists typically arrange vowels on a trapezoid-shaped chart. Vowels produced at the front part of the mouth are represented on the left of the chart (toward the hypothetical open part of the mouth), and vowels produced at the back of the mouth are represented on

the right side of the chart. The charts below show the front and back vowel subsystems.

### Front Vowel Subsystem



### Back Vowel Subsystem



- Vowel shifting is part of the history of every language and results in significant changes over time in the way sounds are pronounced. Part of what makes vowel shifts have such an impact on the way language systems develop is because of the interconnectedness of the vowel space.
  - A change in the articulation of one vowel can encroach on the way another vowel is produced. Or the movement of one vowel can open up possibilities for another vowel sound to move into the articulatory space it previously occupied.
  - This kind of simultaneous related shifting is called a *vowel chain shift*, and such chain shifts can radically reorganize the vowel space of a language or dialect. Indeed, such vowel shifts result in the development of longstanding linguistic divergence because they often affect which vowel categories are perceived in a language.
- As we know, English has shifted quite a bit over time—from its Germanic vowel qualities to Old English, then to Middle English, and finally to Modern English vowel categories. Now it seems as if our vowels are shifting yet again.

### Suggested Reading

Labov, Ash, and Boberg, *The Atlas of North American English*.

University of Iowa, *Phonetics*, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/>.

University of Pennsylvania Linguistics Laboratory, *TELSUR Project*, [http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/home.html](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html).

## Questions to Consider

1. Find bottles in several different shapes, fill them to different levels with water, and blow gently into the bottles. How does the shape and fill level change the sound produced? What makes a higher or lower sound?
2. In what ways do you notice vowels varying among speakers? Can you think of differences that have struck you when you have encountered other regional dialect speakers or speakers much older or younger than you?
3. Think about spellings, such as *ea* or *ee*, that represent the same sound in Modern English. See what you can find out about why we use these different spellings but identical pronunciations.



# Vowel Shifts and Regional American Speech

## Lecture 9

Vowel differences across dialects in the United States have been noted by language specialists for decades. However, over the last 20 years or so, researchers have tied together a number of these earlier vowel changes as the beginnings of chain shifts affecting different dialects in the United States. The three main dialect areas of American English—the South, North, and West—appear to be undergoing separate changes in their respective systems, at least in the front vowel system. At the same time, other changes, primarily those affecting the back vowel system, are more similar across dialects. In this lecture, we will take a closer look at these processes affecting U.S. English.

### The Current Vowel Shift

- A striking similarity exists between the areas affected by today's vowel shifts and the regions recognized in dialectological work from the 1940s. This suggests that the founder's effects in these regions created longstanding linguistic and cultural differences that are still with us, despite increasing opportunities for communication and mobility.
- It is crucial to understand that most vowel shifts are not changing the way we categorize the vowels, meaning that vowels are mostly remaining distinct from other vowels, rather than merging. Whether you say *bag* as “be-aug” or “bag” doesn't make it any less a bag; it just means that how you produced the vowel sounds a little different.
- What is changing is mainly the phonetic realization of the vowels. In other words, how vowels are produced has shifted but not the vowel category we hear them as. Thus, both pronunciations in the *bag* example still have an /æ/ vowel, but that same category—/æ/—now sounds different when you hear it pronounced by speakers with dialects affected by separate shifts.

- Each speaker's basic vowel inventory hasn't changed. The vowel shift in this case just results in us varying the sound a bit when saying the same thing. This, of course, is not true of all the shifts affecting American dialects. As we will see, several mergers are underway that are actually changing our basic vowel inventory in some cases.

### Southern Vowel Shift (SVS)

- The *Southern Vowel Shift* (SVS) refers to the changes affecting vowels in dialects of the American South. In this shift, the vowels that are produced with the tongue tip positioned along a high-to-low continuum at the front of the mouth (the vowels in such words as *beet*, *bit*, *bait*, and *bet*, respectively) are essentially switching positions. The sounds /i/ and /e/ (*beet*, *bait*) are being produced lower and with a more central position of the tongue in the mouth, and /I/ and /E/ (*bit*, *bet*) are being produced with the tongue higher and farther forward in the mouth.
- The instigating shift appears to be /ay/ monophthongization (as in *side* or *tie*), starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This triggered what is called a *pull chain*, in which another vowel moves into the space vacated when the /ay/ vowel moved. In this case, it is the /ey/ vowel (as in *bait*) that started to be produced with the tongue positioned farther back and lower.
- With /ey/ moving a bit out of the way, the vowel /E/ (*bet*) can now move its tongue position forward a bit. Thus, we get a rotation of position in terms of how the vowel is produced in the mouth. In some speakers, this rotation continues in the high vowels, with the /iy/ (*beat*) and the /I/ (*bit*) vowels essentially switching places.
- Studies in a range of places, such as Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee, suggest that most Southern speakers are shifting their /e/ (*bait*) and /E/ (*bet*) vowels. However, the shift in the high vowels (/i/ [*beet*] and /I/ [*bit*]) appears to be an intraregional distinction. Only a small subset of Southerners, mainly in the Appalachian region, shows such additional shifts.

- Most of the vowel shifts affecting regional dialects seem to be, for the most part, affecting ethnically homogenous speakers, that is, white speakers of European descent. However, white and black speakers in the South typically share more cultural and linguistic heritage than in other regions.
  - Of course, this doesn't suggest that there isn't strong ethnic speech marking in the South. There is, in fact, but the SVS vowels are not a main means to do it.
  - Instead, greater incidence of such Southern features as *L*-devocalization ("caw" for "call") and non-rhoticity ("fowth" for "fourth") appears to distinguish many black and white speech varieties.
- The Southern shift also appears to carry connotations of country-ness. Some features of the SVS are widespread in the South, but recent research suggests concentration of SVS tendencies mainly in more rural areas. Most urban centers show a sharp decrease in the front vowel shift, particularly among younger speakers.
- The SVS process appears to be disappearing in the South, unlike the shifts in other regions. The lessening of the shift process probably has two sources: (1) young urban speakers trying to disassociate with rural Southern speech, and (2) in recent years, immense linguistic swamping effects of Northern and foreign in-migration in major urban areas in the South.

### **Northern Cities Shift (NCS)**

- The changes affecting vowel quality in dialects in the North have been labeled the *Northern Cities Shift (NCS)*. In the NCS, the front vowels are shifting in basically the opposite direction of those same vowels in Southern speech. This also seems to be a chain shift process, where a shift in one vowel class is causing a domino effect of other vowels shifting in response.
- The most NCS-shifted speech is found in the inland North, in such areas as Detroit, Chicago, Green Bay, Toledo, and Syracuse. The

instigating shift for the Northern system is the extreme raising of the /æ/ (*bat*) class. Instead of this vowel being produced as “cat” or “bag,” we hear productions close to the high front vowel space: “kit” for *cat* or “beg” for *bag*.

- This /æ/ raising is hypothesized to be a contact-induced change, originating in the early 1800s. When many different /æ/ pronunciations came into contact from different languages and dialects during the building of the Erie Canal, a new /æ/ target was born. The winner of the melting pot was a very raised /æ/ variant, sounding like “e-ah,” that has now come to characterize speech in this region.
- As /æ/ moved toward this new target, it left more space in the low front system for another vowel’s production. As a result of this open space, the vowel /a/ (*cot*) began to move forward and up; thus, *block* now sounds like “black” and *on* sounds more like “Ann.”
- The open o vowel (/ɔ/) in such words as *caught* has descended toward the low back system that short o (/a/, *cot*) vacated. Finally, the short lax vowels /ɪ/ (*bit*) and /E/ (*bet*), with /æ/ now impinging on their articulatory space, are moving back and somewhat lowering in production. Thus, /E/ becomes more like “uh” (as in *I but you five bucks*).
- Unlike the SVS, the shifts affecting Northern speech are predominately found in major urban centers. Also unlike the SVS, the NCS seems to be very active among young speakers, who do not show any sign of retreat. For some shifts, such as that in /æ/, younger speakers do not show greater advancement than older speakers. This suggests that the change has reached the position of a new norm.
- The NCS appears to be mainly a feature of white speech; it has not been reported in African American varieties in the region. Thus, the NCS may serve as a strong ethnic marker in the North.

## Vowel Shift in the West

- Recent research has also found evidence of some changes that appear to characterize speech in the West. The most well-known example is an extensive merger in the low back vowel classes, resulting in such words as *cot* and *caught* or *Don* and *Dawn* sounding alike. This feature of Western English is widespread throughout the region.
- There is also often a neutralization or merger of the tense and lax (traditional long and short) vowels before *l* so that certain word pairs, such as *peel/pill*, *feel/fill*, and *pool/pull*, sound the same. In addition, there is some evidence of a chain shift process affecting speech in the American West. This shift is referred to as the *California Vowel Shift* (CVS), though it has been found in other parts of the West.
- In the CVS, the front vowels show distinctive repositioning. For many Westerners, the /æ/ vowel shows the opposite trend than in the North, significantly retracting and lowering in the Western system. This has been suggested as one of the factors initiating a vowel shift, though this theory is quite controversial. Regardless, the lowering of the low front /æ/ vowel often occurs with retraction of the other front lax vowels (/I/ and /E/, as in *bit* and *bet*), making this region also distinct in its contemporary front vowel production.

## Back Vowel Shifting

- The NCS, SVS, and CVS are resulting in highly differentiated front vowel systems across dialects, but back vowel shifting seems to be reshaping the back system of all three in a like manner. In all regions, back vowels formerly articulated with the tongue body positioned high or mid in the back of the mouth (/u/, /U/, and /o/, as in *boot*, *book*, and *boat*, respectively) are now being articulated with a tongue position that's more to the front. This makes the articulation of *boot* sound closer to "but," for example, but also retains a short secondary vowel sound so they do not merge.
- In addition, the low back vowel merger (*cot/caught*) that characterizes speech in the West is beginning to affect Southern

speakers. Early atlas work found that parts of New England and western Pennsylvania also exhibited the low back vowel merger. This merger is the fastest-expanding change affecting speech in the United States today, and it may end up characterizing speech more widely across the country.

- Still, it is unlikely that we will see American speech completely merged in these classes. Structural constraints in the vowel system of areas affected by the NCS and in Southern dialects that maintain strong diphthongization in the back vowel classes will continue to keep the distinction alive.

### Comparing Regions

- Front vowel shifting is creating greater divergence in America's dialect regions, even as back vowel fronting is creating a convergence in the vowel systems of these regions. What is driving these disparate tendencies, and where are they going? Are regional dialects moving closer together or farther apart?
- Of course, the answers to these questions are a bit complex. The changes affecting various dialects are based on a combination of physiological, articulatory, and social pressures. Will these competing pressures ultimately make the picture of American dialects more or less complex? The answer to that question is still unknown.

### Suggested Reading

Fridland, "Rebel Vowels."

Kennedy and Grama, "Chain Shifting and Centralization in California Vowels."

Labov, Ash, and Boberg, *A National Map of the Regional Dialects of American English*, [http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html).

Van Herk, "Fear of a Black Phonology."

## Questions to Consider

1. If you were asked to describe how the regions differ linguistically, what would be the main distinctions you think of? Now, try to isolate things you have noticed about the way vowel sounds are produced. How would you characterize differences across regions?
2. What do you predict in terms of how gender might interact with the changes described in this lecture? Why?
3. Say these word pairs: *pin/pen*, *cot/caught*, *since/sense*, *collar/caller*. Do you notice that any of them sound identical? If so, think, based on this lecture, how these mergers might identify you.

# Language and Social Class

## Lecture 10

In our last two lectures, we explored how specific changes in vowels orient us to where a speaker is from and indicate membership in regional speech communities. But beyond region, there are many other things we glean when we hear someone talk, such as age, gender, whether the speaker is from an urban or a rural area, and the speaker's socioeconomic status. In this lecture, we will spend some time discussing the influence of status on language, and we'll learn how we make judgments about people's relative status even if we don't have any information about their careers or income.

### Overt and Covert Prestige

- The integration of class and language is found in almost every culture. Some cultural hierarchies, such as the caste system in India, even have separate linguistic forms specifically based on a speaker's relative status. For most of us, though, linguistically signaled status is a frequency-based phenomenon. We vary the degree of our use of such forms as *in/ing* or *gonna*, *wanna*, and *hafta* based, in part, on social status or class.
- Some ways of speaking carry what linguists refer to as *overt prestige*, meaning that they are more globally assigned positive prestige as "educated" or more "correct" forms of language. Almost all speakers of a language recognize which forms carry such overt prestige, but we don't find all speakers using these forms.
- Surprisingly, many speakers maintain the use of speech features that are not considered prestigious in our society. Rather, the speakers typically use linguistic forms and features that are assigned a strong negative evaluation or stigma as a result of their association with low-status groups.
  - Part of the reason speakers maintain such forms is that we don't all have equal access to overtly prestigious forms; it's true, too,



that we may have other speech features that reward us in less overt but nonetheless important ways.

- The notion of *covert prestige* is also important in explaining why members of a community continue to use features that aren't assigned positive prestige. Covert prestige is the assignment of an alternative kind of positive social significance to a linguistic variable. Specifically, covert prestige is based on solidarity in locally defined groups, regardless of the social status the use of such variables may carry in the wider society.
- The concept of covert prestige recognizes that there is an alternative linguistic market—one that values speech forms that signal group membership.
- In terms of assigning class to speakers, stigmatization seems to be a more salient dimension of socially diagnostic features than prestige. We are more apt to classify people on their use of a socially stigmatized variable than on the absence of that variable in their speech.
- We also find that stylistic variation plays a significant role in the frequency with which overtly and covertly prestigious features are used. Studies have overwhelmingly found that the use of a feature that is assigned overt prestige will increase as the formality of the situation increases. This variation based on changes in the formality of the speaker's context is often referred to as *stylistic variation*.

### **Studying Linguistic and Social Variation**

- In earlier lectures, we focused on exploring language variation based on regional differences. We now shift our focus to look at variation among speakers within the same locale but with different social experiences. In making this shift, we focus on more diverse speech communities, such as highly diverse urban areas. Looking at speech in cities, rather than mainly rural areas, gives a better sense of language and society as they exist today.



© Andraas Kareklas/Stock/Thinkstock

**Americans value financial success, but we also value local identity; because of the hard-working, commonsense associations we have with “local” speech, we assign it a different kind of prestige.**

- Although traditional dialect atlas methods gave us good historical information, many of those methods do not translate well when we want to move beyond looking at strictly regional differences. Rural areas may show greater uniformity in terms of dialect use, but urban areas present a much more complex puzzle linguistically.
- Further, we can easily find examples of variation in dialects spoken in urban areas, although we probably don’t associate those differences with region. For example, if you heard a speaker say, “She ain’t got no style,” you would likely think this is an ethnic or class marker rather than a regional difference.
- How do we make sense of such variations? And what kind of methods should we use to examine the relationship between linguistic and social variation? First, we may want to consider the nature of the differences we find in such contexts. Differences in

speech forms used within the same region are often not simply a matter of relic forms competing with incoming forms. More often, they are related to social differences among speakers.

- Consider the following sets of speaker utterances: *You don't do nothing for it*; *You did not do anything for it*; *You ain't done nothing for it*; *You didn't do anything for it*.
- Essentially, all these sentences say the same thing, but the form they use to express it differs. If you overheard speakers using these phrases, you would probably say that they differ in terms of social standing. In other words, the differences are a matter of class.
- We use associations with class to make many decisions about people, such as who we will trust, who we will hire, or who we might date. Language affords us a relatively quick and easy way to make such judgments.

### **Variationist Sociolinguistics**

- In many of the early atlas projects in America, linguists recognized that people in the same dialect area are differentially integrated into the class structure. Thus, researchers often inquired about the educational level of informants and typically found that differences among speakers correlated with differences in educational level.
- The recognition that dialects vary both socially and regionally shows that social barriers and social distance are as real an influence on dialect as geographic barriers and distance. This realization eventually led to the birth of a new linguistic paradigm known as *variationist sociolinguistics*.
- Variationist research is based on the idea that the features of a speech community vary in a systematic way. When we pull out individual speech features and look at their patterns of use, we find that systematic trends emerge. In other words, there is a pattern to when features are or are not used, even though, on the surface, such use seems random.

- Instead of charting regional differences, variationist research examines the social factors that underlie linguistic patterns. This has allowed linguists to gain a better understanding of why changes progress through some communities and speakers but not others. It also provides a way of understanding the speech of densely populated urban areas and helps unravel the structured social variation behind individual linguistic variation.
  - The first true research in this new paradigm was that of William Labov. His seminal 1966 work *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* was the first in-depth analysis of the role of social factors on speech in an urban area.
  - Labov's study of rhotic and non-rhotic speech (using or not using post-vocalic /r/) confirmed his hypothesis that the reemergence of rhotic speech in New York was class-stratified. Non-rhotic speech, which had been an accepted pattern in New York City until World War I, was changing to the rhotic speech found as standard in most other U.S. dialects.
  - Further, Labov discovered that rhotic speech use increased when his subjects paid more attention to their speech. This suggested an awareness of the overt prestige associated with /r/ use, prompting an increase in more monitored speech.
- Labov founded the field of modern sociolinguistics and went on to contribute some of the most influential work in linguistics over the last 50 years. His main contribution in this early work was to point out how the speech of the individual reflects community patterns structured by the social categories we inhabit.
  - This idea is known as *orderly heterogeneity*. On the surface, language variation appears to be disorganized and random, but it is actually rule-governed and predictable if we consider that social differences among speakers are reflected systematically in language differences.

- In this way, social differences interact with language in much the same way as regional differences: the greater the separation among speakers, the greater the linguistic differences.

### **Class and Linguistic Change**

- Most interesting in Labov's work was the insight it provided on the role played by class in the progression of linguistic change.
  - In Labov's study of /r/ use in New York City, he noticed an interesting pattern: The lower-middle-class speakers used /r/ more than even the middle-middle-class group.
  - This work was among the first to point out that linguistic change is most likely to be led not by higher-class groups but by members of the upper-working and lower-middle classes. This pattern has since been found to be fairly typical for the course of linguistic change.
- Linguistic change tends to start in some speakers within a particular class and social group, then diffuse locally within that group first. In other words, changes often move within class groups before moving out to other groups within the community.
  - The most peripheral groups—the lowest and highest classes—are so marginal to the social hierarchy that they don't seem to have much to do with language change processes.
  - By contrast, the upper-working and lower-middle classes consistently start and spread linguistic changes because they have less to lose and more to gain.
- To drive change, speakers must also have ties to local identity so that they are sensitive to local innovation, though this is typically an unconscious process. Lower-middle-class and upper-working-class speakers typically have social network structures that are more conducive to picking up local innovations.
- Linguists have found that all changes are not created equal in terms of how they diffuse through the social hierarchy. The types of

changes that occur in language are crucial in determining whether and how a change spreads.

- Two major categories of linguistic changes have been identified in variationist studies: changes from below, which take place below the level of consciousness (most sound changes), and changes from above, which take place above the level of conscious awareness (changes away from stigmatized variables).
- Lower classes are more likely to be active in changes from below, while middle-class groups are most likely to be active in changes from above.
- Resistance to change plays a significant role in this process; often, middle classes try to avoid changes taking place in other groups to maintain the status differentiation. Generally, lower classes adopt naturally occurring changes first, and if other speakers then become aware of the changes, the upper classes try to reject or resist them. The reality, however, is that many changes in communities progress through the class hierarchy to become new norms.

### Suggested Reading

Labov, “The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores,” in *Sociolinguistic Patterns*.

Trudgill, *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, “Social and Ethnic Dialects,” in *American English*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Consider how speech features mark your class. Do you ever use such features as the *in/ing* variable or *gonna* and *wanna* contractions? Do you ever palatalize /s/, /t/, or /d/ sounds when they precede a /y/ sound, as in *don't you* pronounced as “doncha” or *can't you* pronounced as “cancha”? These are all less prestigious features that most of us use. The key is that we stigmatize users of these features who use them at a frequency much

higher than we do. Yet we, too, exhibit lower-level variation. Does this perhaps change how you would view the use or class association of such features?

2. Picking up on how we finished this lecture, think about other identity factors that might influence linguistic change. For example, if you are a white male, how might your speech differ from others in your class group who are of a different generation or race? What similarities might you share in your orientation toward standard and nonstandard norms? How might this be altered by your membership in differing social or ethnic groups? In other words, is class all there is to this picture?
3. Can you name features of your dialect that make it standard, or is it easier to name features that would make someone's speech nonstandard? Interestingly, standard speech seems to be more defined by what it is lacking than what it includes; why might this be the case?

# Sex, Age, and Language Change

## Lecture 11

When we think of language change, we almost always attribute it to the young, and as it turns out, age is a crucial mechanism of change. In almost every study of changes in a community, young speakers are in the lead. It is perhaps this tendency of language to change in the hands of the young that makes older people view change as decay. But as we discovered when we looked at the history of English, change is a reliable part of language. As we age, we seem to lean toward more standard norms and pick up fewer linguistic innovations. In this lecture, we'll explore this pattern, as well as language differences between genders.

### Age Differences in Language Change

- A key assumption of most work on language change is that once we become adults, our dialect patterns become stable. We learn new vocabulary words and some syntactic patterns, but basically, our linguistic repertoire is set by early adulthood.
- The ability of adults to pick up on incoming forms seems to depend somewhat on what the change involves. Some linguistic variants, particularly complex phonological rules, seem less accessible for later acquisition than others.
- It's possible to acquire limited proficiency that may make it seem as if adults are able to pick up a given dialect shift. However, if we compare the degree to which adults and younger speakers use the pattern, we find that adults typically use it at a lower frequency and that the pattern isn't as systematic as it is among younger speakers.
- This does not mean that no linguistic alterations are possible into adulthood, but most research supports the hypothesis of dialect stability after adolescence.





© Monkey Business/monkey business Images Ltd/Thinkstock

**Learning two or more languages is much easier when the process of first language acquisition is still in progress.**

### **Acquiring Variants**

- Several studies suggest that children typically acquire the speech systems of their mothers or primary caregivers. However, as children age, they are affected by *vernacular reorganization*. This often occurs between the ages of 4 and 8, when children start to speak less like their parents and more like their peer groups.
- During this reorientation period, children pick up sounds and syntax, as well as words. This shift in social orientation appears to trigger *incrementation*, which is the process through which children advance changes past the levels of their caretakers. It is through incrementation that new norms become established.
- However, not all linguistic changes advance at the same rate. Some changes advance in a linear way, with each generation progressing a step more than their parents; the result is consistent advancement over time. Other changes are more fitful in their progress, advancing, then decreasing in use as children age. Social barriers

may be at work in this pattern. When the meaning of a variant is not firmly established, associations with particularly user groups—such as girls or drug users—may sometimes stall or speed up the process of change.

### Age Grading

- To study the relationship between language change and age, linguists use the *apparent time construct*. This theoretical construct enables diachronic changes (changes over time) to be modeled synchronically (within a single time period). In this construct, dialect features of several generations are compared at a single point in time. The differences among the generations are then presumed to represent snapshots of each group's language across time.
- Not surprisingly, studies typically find differences across generations, but it may be surprising to learn that not all differences are indicative of true linguistic change. Instead of real change, some differences in use across age groups are a result of a phenomenon called *age grading*—a reflection of the fact that certain linguistic features are associated with particular life phases.
- As people age, they use fewer of these features, but the next generation of younger speakers continues to use them at a higher rate. This is different than the more familiar idea of generational change—when speakers in a community adopt a linguistic variant and continue to increase its use with every generation, with no age-related decrease.
- A good example of age-graded variation is the use of the verbal *in/ing* alternation. In studies of this variation, differences across age groups are consistent, with younger groups using the *in* variant to a greater degree. At first glance, this might suggest that we are in a process of gradually replacing *ing* with *in*. Data suggest, however, that as we age, we decrease use of the *in* variant. This phenomenon is referred to as *age-graded stable variation*.

## Gender Influence on Language

- Childhood plays a critical role in the process of establishing gendered differences in our basic linguistic systems. Girls and boys start off similarly in terms of their language systems, but as they age, women typically end up a generation ahead of men in linguistic innovations. At the same time, women are often thought of as more linguistically conservative than men, using more standard variants, less slang, and more “proper” speech all around.
- Such linguistic differences between men and women are quite surprising given the amount of time we spend with each other. Yet linguistic research consistently finds gender-based differences in speech, and these often follow similar patterns.
- Women consistently lead in the use of incoming prestige forms, and they are leading in most of the incoming vowel changes we discussed in earlier lectures. This pattern of female-led change appears consistent through time. Research on archival documents suggests that even Early Modern changes, such as the movement away from the *you* and *ye* system of older English toward *you*, was led by women.
- The changes led by men are typically of a different type than those led by women. For example, several studies have found that men seem to be more likely to lead in the use of highly localized variants—those that don’t necessarily become associated with prestige or social status but, instead, signal solidarity.
  - For example, in a study conducted at Martha’s Vineyard in the early 1960s, Labov found an increasing use of centralized variants in diphthongs, such as /ay/ and /aw/. These variants seemed to be signals of long-term residency on the island.
  - The movement toward the central variants was led by men—specifically, men expressing strong ties to the local community and the traditional ways of life that were being threatened by a shift toward a tourist-based economy in Martha’s Vineyard.

- Such early studies show that it is not gender per se that creates differential use of linguistic variants. Instead, it's the way that gender and social identity interact, making some identities more attractive and useful to one gender than the other. Women often get more social currency from the use of potential prestige forms; in contrast, men get more mileage out of forms that signal solidarity and masculinity.

### Gender Differences and Types of Linguistic Changes

- The difference in the types of associations that are more attractive to men and women affects how likely they are to pick up on changes entering a community. Much depends on the type of social awareness that surrounds the incoming form.
- Linguists have documented both changes that appear to introduce completely new variants and changes that are movements toward linguistic models evidenced elsewhere.
  - For example, many of the vowel changes we discussed in earlier lectures, such as /æ/ raising in the North or *bait/bet* reversal in the South, are innovative. The shift has not been borrowed from another source but is a product of inherent linguistic variability. Typically, such changes are adopted without any level of conscious awareness and are referred to as *changes from below*. Speakers adopt the shifts before any social meaning or stigma becomes attached to them.
  - However, other shifts, such as the move toward rhoticity in New York or the reversal of the *pin/pen* merger, mimic linguistic forms used by other social or regional groups. Movements toward external linguistic forms typically involve more conscious awareness of the forms and are referred to as *changes from above*. Some social prestige or stigma is usually attached to such forms before they are adopted into a community.
  - In addition to changes from above and from below, a final type of variation involves not a change in linguistic behavior but a

consistent alternation between two or more variants. The *in/ing* alternation and *gonna*, *wanna*, *hafta* contractions are examples of this *stable variation*.

- Linguists have found that gender differences are tied to the type of change that affects a speech community. A consistent finding is that men typically use more nonstandard forms in stable variation, such as *in* instead of *ing*, while women use the more standard forms in these cases. Women also tend to lead in incoming prestige forms and, surprisingly, changes from below. Unlike cases of stable variation or changes from above, women actually use more innovative forms in changes from below.
  - Much of the literature suggests that women are more aware of the stylistic and social import of language because their social position is less secure and subordinate to that of men. Some differences may also be a result of gendered employment opportunities. Jobs that typically fall to women, such as teacher or secretary, often have stronger requirements for standard speech than such jobs as mechanic or factory worker.
  - In contrast, nonstandard speech has connotations of masculinity and toughness (offering covert prestige) that is more attractive to men and less well received when used by women. Nonconformity to social norms is typically more tolerated and expected from men.
- The social repercussions are, in essence, quite different for each gender, as are the rewards. For such features as multiple negation that have a clear association with social status, we can see why women and men might show differences in behavior. But why are women more likely to use linguistic innovations?
  - One explanation is that women are more sensitive to changes that put them in the vanguard stylistically. We notice and reward women for being stylish; thus, women get more social currency by being attuned to new trends. Likewise, the advantages to women of being on the forefront of linguistic changes may provide greater possibility for social advancement.

- For men, the social currency of nonstandard forms often provides social acceptance, but the same is not true for women. As a result, women have more to gain from adopting changes that do not have negative social connotations and that are potential incoming new norms.
- Although much research has suggested a relationship between language and gender, it is hard to pin down linguistic universals about gender. In fact, there is no intrinsic link between certain types of changes and gender. It is a matter of how meaning is assigned and valued by different groups within a society.

### Suggested Reading

Labov, “The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change.”

Nevalainen, “Gender Differences in the Evolution of Standard English.”

Sankoff, “Age: Apparent Time and Real Time.”

Wardhaugh, “Change.”

### Questions to Consider

1. As a way to test some of the research cited in this lecture, record a casual conversation you have with two men and two women with whom you are friends or relatives. If you can, have one of each gender be under 25 and one older than 35. At the end of the conversation, have your participants read the following words off individual flashcards as you continue recording: *walking, running, dog, hibernating, sighing, laugh, eating, reinstituting, happy, facing*.
2. After you have recorded the conversations, select the most conversational five minutes of each and count the number of times you use either an *in* or an *ing* variant (regardless of which you use). Now, count the number of times your conversational partner used this ending. Count only verbal *ing* endings (for example, *walking* or *jogging* but not

*ring* or *thing*). It may be easier to transcribe the conversation to identify these instances. Out of the potential instances for *in/ing* use, how many were realized as *in* versus *ing*?

3. Calculate and compare the rates of *in* use for each participant. You can calculate this percentage by dividing the number of *in* uses by the number of instances when *in* could have been used (that is, all potential verbal *ing* endings in the conversation). For example, if your partner spoke 12 total *ing*-ending words and used 3 *in* variants, his or her rate of *in* use would be 25 percent. Do the rates of use vary by age and gender? How do your results fit in with those discussed in the lecture? Does your percentage of use vary based on the age and gender of your co-conversationalist? Does your relationship type (friend or family member) seem to create differences in the rate of use?
4. Finally, compare each participant's use of the *in* variant in conversation to the rate of use in reading the word list. What differences do you note? How does style seem to influence the use of this variant?

# Language Attitudes and Social Perception

## Lecture 12

In addition to talking, we also listen, and as a result, we alter our speech in ways directly related to what we hear. Language attitudes are embedded in almost all our decisions about what we say and how we say it, and we are aware of how our speech can affect the way others evaluate us socially. This is why, for example, we shift to a more formal, standard style when speaking in a professional context than when talking to a family member. Thus, in addition to understanding speech production, it's important to think about speech perception. In this lecture, we will analyze some of the ideas associated with different types of speech.

### The Influence of Language Attitudes

- From a linguistic perspective, *language attitudes* are the beliefs we form about our own languages or about other languages or varieties. Most of our attitudes are not created in a vacuum but reflect the social values of the larger community, typically, the prevailing social order.
- These attitudes are often formed in social or political contexts that predispose us to certain views. The myths surrounding standard languages demonstrate this fact clearly. From a purely linguistic standpoint, there is nothing about a standard language that is actually superior, yet its socially preferred position is constantly seen as a statement about its linguistic superiority.
  - In the process of colonization, the language of the colonizer often holds higher prestige than local languages. Over time, this association of a particular language with governmental and institutional authority predisposes people to look at it as intrinsically better than languages or dialects used for mundane daily tasks.



- This sense then becomes associated with the speakers of the second language; in other words, speakers of local varieties or languages are often looked down upon.
- Our language attitudes reflect our feelings about the speakers of a language rather than the language itself. It is much more acceptable to say that someone's language sounds uneducated than to say that the speaker seems to be uneducated. When we have a particular thought or feeling about someone's speech, we are really reacting to that person's social orientation and affiliations.
- We have many beliefs about languages and their speakers, but for the most part, these beliefs are quite arbitrary. Our reactions to a language are typically reactions to the speakers or the cultures they represent. The more foreign the culture, the more dramatic our attitudes toward the language can be.

### **Formation of Language Attitudes**

- Language attitudes are often formed by contact with particular speakers of a language. Our associative experiences with these speakers may add up to negative or positive reactions to specific languages.
- A positive experience with a speaker or culture tends to make our next experience with that language more positive. In contrast, a negative experience may predispose us toward a negative association in the future.
- However, the relationship between speakers of different languages that come into contact is not always so black and white.
  - For example, a complicated relationship among languages may emerge in situations of military expansion and occupation. Colonial languages are often politically and economically influential long after the colonizing nation has departed. They may be viewed as necessary evils on the path to advancement for native inhabitants of a formerly occupied region.

- The institutional dominance of a colonial language coupled with the advantage of having one “official” national language often creates a situation where the majority of citizens speak a language different than that of their government. Although designating the colonial language as official may be efficient, it also serves as a reminder of oppression and a barrier to advancement. As a result, there are typically conflicted, often hostile attitudes toward the official language.
- In some cases, local languages become associated with local administrations and domestic concerns while official languages become the language of nation, trade, and education. Attitudes toward each variety then become tangled up with the purposes they serve. This tends to elevate the intellectual and educated associations of the official language at the expense of the local languages.

### Dialect Attitudes

- Like our beliefs about separate languages, our attitudes toward varieties of our own language are often formed based on sociocultural experiences and patterns of use. Consider, for example, the attitudes you may hold toward differences in the way men and women speak or how different ethnic groups use language.
- Many people make associations with regional varieties of speech. Southern speech, for example, may be perceived as slow and friendly, while Northern speech is viewed as more correct but perhaps less pleasant.
- For many people, there is also a dichotomy between “normal” dialects that follow standard norms and those that don’t. In other words, we tend to think in terms of “right” and “wrong” rather than just different. Nonstandard dialects are typically judged poorly by standard speakers but clearly are more favorably received within local communities, or they would cease to exist.

- For most of us, class and ethnic dialects represent less attractive social groups; thus, they tend to be perceived as less desirable dialects. As a consequence, differences between the standard variety and other varieties are viewed as differences between “good” and “bad” speech.
- When social groups are not viewed favorably in a larger community, it is unlikely that their speech will acquire a more elevated status. The same feature, in fact, can be viewed as prestigious and intelligent in a standard dialect even as it is considered lazy and sloppy in a less prestigious variety. A perfect example of this is the view on /r/-less speech in the United States. Non-rhoticity is a prominent feature of Received Pronunciation in Britain and may be viewed positively by American listeners, but it may be seen as a marker of a less upscale dialect when heard from a taxi driver in New York City.

### Research on Language Attitudes

- To measure language attitudes indirectly, some Canadian researchers pioneered the use of the *matched-guise technique*. A typical matched-guise study proceeds by recording several versions of one speaker talking in different guises. It then asks subjects to rate each guise on semantic differential scales.
  - The trick here is that the different guises are presented in a way that suggests they represent different speakers when, in fact, each guise is the same speaker altering his or her speech in one particular way.
  - With this technique, researchers can determine attitudinal responses to shifts or variations of interest.
- Early research on language attitudes using the matched-guise method generally explored how speakers of separate languages with high degrees of contact reacted to each other's speech.
  - These studies showed a pattern in which speakers of a dominant language are held in high esteem by speakers of both the dominant and the minority languages. However, minority-

language speakers are often judged as friendly and pleasant, again, by speakers of both languages.

- Such results suggest that the minority language is recognized as carrying social import, even though speakers intuitively grasp the political and economic currency of the dominant language.
- Other studies have found a different kind of behavioral adjustment in response to language cues. *Accommodation theory* suggests that when you are in the presence of another speaker, you unconsciously adjust your speech behavior. Your speech may *diverge* to be less similar to the other speaker's, *converge* to be more similar, or show neither divergence nor convergence, suggesting another level of attitude.
  - Results in these studies sometimes reveal *linguistic insecurity*, that is, the idea that we have socialized feelings toward nonstandard or local varieties as being somehow deficient relative to a standard or model variety.
  - We may continue to use these nonstandard varieties even though we feel they sound less educated or intelligent because we tend to like speakers who use them. Because we spend most of our time negotiating the world socially with others who use the same language variety that we do, speaking locally is often an asset. Using a standard or model variety can make us sound elitist and estranged from local concerns and relationships.
- In addition to matched-guise studies that delve into language attitudes, researchers also conduct studies that simply ask for people's ideas about language. These *folk-linguistic* studies tap into language attitudes more directly; they generally ask for overt evaluations or ask subjects to self-report their use of a variable.
  - As we've seen, speakers are generally not very aware of their own speech behavior in terms of estimating their use of a variable accurately. But even so, the way they report their use tells us a great deal both about their language attitudes and about their linguistic security—or insecurity.



© Creatas/Thinkstock

**The use of nonstandard language varieties reflects the importance for many of us of a sense of community.**

- Such studies suggest that folk perceptions play a large role both in defining stigmatized language varieties and in assigning negative associations to their speakers.

### **Language Attitude Triggers**

- Can linguists pinpoint particular features that seem most likely to trigger negative or positive language attitudes? Several studies have illustrated how social meaning and specific language forms are related.
- In a study from 2007, Kathryn Campbell-Kibler digitally manipulated different rates of *ing* and *in* use in speech samples to see how they affected listener judgments. Her results showed that speech features activate complex language attitudes in listeners—attitudes that go beyond a simple judgment of “good” or “bad” speech. For example, increasing the use of the *ing* form in speech

samples increased the likelihood that the speaker would be viewed as gay.

- Interestingly, some research suggests that the language attitudes we bring to an interaction may actually influence the way we perceive sounds in the first place.
  - In one experiment, sociolinguist Nancy Niedzielski had listeners from Detroit identify vowel categories spoken by a sample speaker. The only difference between responding subject groups was whether the sample speaker was labeled as American or Canadian on the subjects' answer sheets.
  - Niedzielski found that this difference in designation actually altered listeners' perception of the vowel category they thought they heard from the speaker. In other words, though they were actually hearing the same speaker, subjects reported hearing different vowels if they thought the speaker was Canadian rather than American.
- Our expectations and beliefs about language are far from innocuous. Language attitudes are the result of our socialization and experiences. They affect how we judge speakers in terms of how they fit our social norms and how suitable we find them as colleagues and friends. Even more strikingly, our stereotypes can actually alter our perception of the speech signal itself, changing how we categorize our input.

### Suggested Reading

Fasold, "Language Attitudes."

Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum, "Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Language."

Niedzielski, "The Effect of Social Information on the Perception of Sociolinguistic Variables."

Preston, "Where the Worst English Is Spoken."

## Questions to Consider

1. What kinds of information do you typically have access to when you encounter people and form opinions about their classes or personalities?
2. How do you vary your own speech in different contexts in ways that suggest you are aware of the effects of different linguistic features on your listeners' perceptions?
3. Think about how characters in movies and television are portrayed through dialect choices. What type of accent do bad guys have? How about the funny characters or the sexy ones? How do these portrayals reveal ingrained language attitudes?

# Language as a Communicative Process

## Lecture 13

In earlier lectures, we have seen how micro-level language variation identifies speakers on the basis of gender, age, class, and other social factors. But as sociolinguists, we want to understand language as a communicative process, not simply as a single individual's system. As a result, we can't look at language variation as based solely on the social characteristics of individual speakers. Rather, we need to study language more holistically; we need to see how larger units of talk structured into conversations are used as a form of social organization. Thus, in the next few lectures, we will look at the bigger picture behind language variation, examining how we speak and how our speech is shaped in response to others.

### Ethnographic Approaches to Studying Conversation

- *Ethnography* refers to the study of human cultures. An ethnographic approach to sociolinguistics means studying language and interaction from the perspective of participants and their unique cultural or social views. This approach was introduced in the 1960s by the American anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes.
- As an anthropologist, Hymes was interested in the connection between language and society and the process of learning not just the grammatical system itself but a whole range of other competencies related to how, when, and where to use it.
- The ethnographic approach pioneered by Hymes seeks to understand the social and cultural knowledge and values that underlie how we use language in social situations. By drawing on the insights of this approach, we can better understand how members of a speech community learn to communicate and how situational factors are constitutive of the speech event. Similarly, the work of Hymes and others gives us a useful tool for exploring cross-cultural communication.



## Defining *Conversation*

- *Conversations*—or connected, co-constructed speech—are always tied to particular people, activities, and places. Of course, the people with whom we converse have their own linguistic baggage and expectations. Thus, who we talk to and where and why we talk are important factors in shaping our linguistic contributions.
- Different speaking events have different linguistic behaviors associated with them, and we learn to tailor our speech appropriately as part of our cultural socialization. This, in turn, creates and sustains the linguistic organization of specific speech events as being recognizable and “normal” by members of a society.
  - Consider the following statement: *You will not go there, Counselor, or you will be charged with contempt.* Even out of context, we have a clear sense of the event, setting, and participants surrounding this statement.
  - This understanding is part of our learned language routines. We don’t know only how to construct such sentences but also what contexts and events they typically describe. We use this information to interact and engage as members of a society.

## Communicative Competence

- As we’ve seen, language use is shaped to a degree by static social facts—ones that display our identities as speakers, such as age, ethnicity, or gender. These facts provide the framework for the inventory of language features from which we draw. But we also have expectations for behavior and the routines in which such speech takes place. This knowledge about what is appropriate in various contexts is known as *communicative competence*.
- Communicative competence is essentially using language in a socially informed way to achieve communicative goals. To do this, we must have more than knowledge of the grammatical system; we must understand where and how to use language in context. It includes the knowledge of linguistic and social conventions.

- Consider how participants in a particular culture cooperatively create norms for various speech events, such as dating or attending business meetings. We can see how these shared acts of communication actually help to construct social reality for that group or society. They let us make sense of our own and other's actions.



© Catherine Yeuler/Stock/Thinkstock.

**Participants in a culture create norms for speech events, such as going to the doctor; here, the setting, the participants, and the norms interact to affect the speech outcome.**

- According to the *SPEAKING* model, in order to be competent communicators, we must consider eight factors when analyzing speech in context. The first letters of these eight factors spell out *SPEAKING*:
  - Setting—the time and place of the conversation.
  - Participants—those involved in the conversation.
  - Ends, or purpose of the conversation.
  - Act sequence—structure or order of the various speech acts in a conversation.
  - Key, or general tone of the conversation.
  - Instrumentalities, or style of the speech.
  - Norms—what is accepted as socially appropriate in a particular speaking event.
  - Genre, or type of speech event that is occurring.

- The idea behind the SPEAKING model is that examining these different aspects of the speaking situation should enable us to locate patterns in how we construct conversation contextually.
  - Some speech events are more “scripted” than others. Obviously, a visit to a doctor or a courtroom has a formal set of conventionalized speech norms—more so than a trip to the corner market or a chat with neighbors.
  - However, in all these contexts, we have expectations for what is or is not appropriate and will often feel uncomfortable or simply confused if these expectations are not met. This is because, as Hymes suggests, we have an understanding of what is expected based on the SPEAKING model and because we assume that others operate with the same understanding when we enter into conversations with them.

### **Cross-Cultural Communication**

- Breakdowns are much more likely to occur in cross-cultural conversations than in those with someone who is familiar with our cultural norms and speech event structures. Our expectations for the setting, participants, norms, genre, and so on are often constructed very differently in terms of what we have learned is appropriate in different cultures.
- In some cultures, such as American culture, complimenting behavior is considered polite and is done not just to truly express appreciation but to make others feel good. But people from other cultures sometimes feel that Americans are insincere in our compliments, and in many cases, we are.
- Similarly, many cultures have different norms for when speech is even appropriate, with silence playing a more extensive role than it does in American culture, where we consider casual banter a valued skill. The Western Apache culture, for example, typically requires silence, not small talk, when entering new relationships or unfamiliar situations.

- In addition, American classrooms are quite informal compared to those in many other cultures, where silence and attention by students to the teacher are prioritized. Particularly at the collegiate level, many American professors encourage participation and shared ideas from students. But in other cultures, such as those in Japan or Turkey, it is considered insulting and highly inappropriate for students to compete for the floor with the professor.

### Speakers' Motivations and Expectations

- Conversation is an active, context-sensitive creation by a community of speakers seeking to maintain social cohesion and organization. It is driven by our cultural and social experiences and provides a framework that allows us to define appropriate speech behavior.
  - This view of conversation is a more functional one than that discussed in our earlier lectures. The variation of sounds, word parts, and sentences that we focused on earlier looks more at the effect that a speaker's social roles has on his or her linguistic features. However, this view doesn't explore how talk is structured at the macro level—such as in a conversation—to create and sustain our social world.
  - To examine this more interactive, dynamic engagement of speakers in connected discourse, we must consider speakers' motivations and expectations to a greater extent than we did when looking at socially based variation in individual linguistic features.
- In other words, our linguistic choices are not simply a reflection of the static social characteristics of speakers involved in the conversation. We actively engage with others, shifting and altering our linguistic moves as conversation unfolds. These choices, of course, are not unconstrained: We inherit, as part of the process of being socialized into appropriate linguistic conventions, a range of possible features depending on who we are and who we talk to.
  - But within this range (*repertoire*), we understand how to make meaning of linguistic moves and responses. To make

conversation work, we must all have a similar set of behaviors that we mutually recognize as making sense. We come to this mutual understanding as part of our experience as social actors in a particular society.

- Another linguist who has had a powerful influence on our understanding of conversation is John Gumperz, who focused on the sociocultural and background knowledge we bring to conversational events. To interact successfully requires a social consensus that we will act in particular ways to be properly understood. This consensus, in fact, allows us to infer much more than we explicitly say when we have a conversation.
- Another influential scholar, Harold Garfinkel, was a sociologist who founded the field of ethnomethodology. His ideas, like those of Hymes, focus on how people interpret events and conversation through their experiences and expectations. A fundamental aspect of this interpretive ability is that it is developed by participation in a particular society, within particular contexts. Language is recognized as a key medium through which such interpretation is achieved.
  - In a series of well-known experiments, Garfinkel had his students purposefully violate some implicit rules in conversation. For example, he asked students to engage in casual conversations with their friends but to insist that their conversational partners clarify the meaning of common remarks.
  - This research showed that we don't realize how much we assume about shared norms when we engage in conversations. Our collective experience as members of a society allows us to omit a great deal of clarifying information. We simply assume that participants come to a conversation with mutual understanding of how it should proceed.
- Conversation requires us to do a great deal of “online processing” to be successful. We synthesize information about the setting, participants, sequential acts, purposes, norms, and more when we converse. How we recognize these as fitting into a schema or

framework is greatly influenced by our social experiences and participation in a particular culture.

### Suggested Reading

Basso, “‘To Give Up on Words.’”

Garfinkel, “Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities.”

Hymes, “On Communicative Competence.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Can you think of any examples, such as a child’s misunderstanding about a meat thermometer, that reveal how much implicit information is included in our everyday conversational exchanges?
2. If you are game, give one of Garfinkel’s experiments a try. Either continue to question a friend about what he or she says that assumes implicit knowledge (as in the lecture example) or go into a store and ask the clerk “Can I help you?” Think about how your experiment forefronts our learned norms and linguistic routines. Be prepared for some bewildered looks.
3. Use the SPEAKING model to examine how much your speech changes depending on the factors described. How much of your conversation would change if, for example, you were talking to a stranger versus a close friend or in work setting versus a social one? How much of the change is more related to your normal speaking style, such as being a certain age, class, and gender?
4. Much of the later work on communicative competence focuses on nonnative speakers and whether communicative competence can be taught. In your experience, can you learn this kind of socially acquired knowledge? If so, what are the constraints?

# Making Sense of Conversational Intentions

## Lecture 14

Linguists look at how we decode utterances and units of talk in a number of ways. One way to explore meaning, for example, is in terms of the literal meaning of words, phrases, and sentences; this is the concern of semantics. In our last lecture, we learned that conversation is often not quite what it seems. In a different setting, for different ends, or with different people, the same words can take on substantially different meaning. In conversation, we look beyond the semantic meaning of words to the culturally and situationally embedded meanings that we have learned through experience. In this lecture, we will consider this separation between literal meaning and socially derived meaning in greater depth.

### Pragmatics

- The field of pragmatics examines how we use social and cultural knowledge to derive additional meaning and intentions from conversations. For example, if someone asks, “Can you pass the salt?” you understand that as a request, but the semantic or literal meaning of that question is whether you have the ability to do the task. This example illustrates the fact that in addition to the literal meaning of a sentence, we also know the intentions behind certain types of speech acts.
- It’s important to know the meaning, in a strict sense, of words and sentences. But most of what we understand in conversation is meaning built up from our knowledge of the grammar of a language and our understanding of how that grammar is put to work in the real world. The word *pragmatics* in this field of study alludes to the fact that we use pragmatic knowledge to disambiguate the meaning people intend.
- In addition to explaining how meaning is derived from context, pragmatics explores how we say things without actually saying

them. In fact, we often don't say what we mean but rely on past experience and context to convey much of our meaning for us.

- We use pragmatic knowledge in every encounter we have. When we think about it, though, it is quite remarkable that we can understand what we're saying to each other, even though, on the surface, our utterances may have no obvious relation to the topic at hand.
  - For example, suppose you ask a friend to go see a movie and she replies that she has a horrible headache. The relationship between your question and her response is not at all obvious on the surface, but you know that she is turning down a date for the movie. You're so good at reading between the conversational lines that you don't even notice that her answer is not semantically connected to what you asked.
  - The connection between the two utterances was pragmatically understood as an inference. You can infer (or reason) based on your friend's comment about her head that her answer to your question is no. Semantically, the literal meanings of these two utterances are unrelated, but based on the context of use and your pragmatic understanding of speaker intention, the exchange makes perfect sense.

### Presupposition

- One area of interest to pragmatists is *presupposition*—the idea that we must assume certain facts about the world in order for an utterance to be considered true. We often don't even realize that what we've said requires such assumptions.
- An example of presupposition is contained in the question *Have you stopped beating your dog?* Anyone overhearing this question would understandably react with horror. The sentence assumes that, at least at some point, you hit your dog. And even if you negate the sentence—*No, I haven't stopped beating my dog*—you are still a dog beater.



- If someone asks you if you stopped something, he or she alters the conversational context of the exchange to include the activity that was allegedly stopped. Though you may never concede that you beat your dog, someone who overheard the exchange would assume that you were a dog beater simply because the verb *stop* insinuates it.
- Here, the verb *stop* creates an assumption on the part of the listener that whatever was stopped had, in fact, been going on previously, whether or not it actually had. This is what is known as a presupposition, and it is one of the ways we have for making subtle leading suggestions about what we assume to be true about the world.
- Many words or phrases create presuppositions or take things for granted, while others make no such assumptions. Consider, for example, two similar sentences: (1) *Frank confessed he killed the professor*, and (2) *Frank worried he killed the professor*.
  - Although it may be that the professor is dead in both cases, it is assumed to be true in the first sentence and merely a possibility in the second.
  - In other words, the verb choice *confessed* takes for granted that the professor was actually killed while *worried* does not.

### Common Ground

- Why do some words or phrases create presuppositions? This additional sense has to do with the pragmatic concept of *common ground*, developed by the philosopher Robert Stalnaker in the 1970s.
- *Common ground* refers to what is taken as background knowledge by speakers engaged in discourse—what speakers assume (whether they believe it or not) as background information when conversing. Presupposition is one way of adding to the common ground of a conversation.
- Some aspects of the common ground of any conversation are fairly obvious, such as the fact that the participants are humans, that they

can speak and hear, and so on. Other aspects are explicitly made part of our background knowledge by being stated during the conversation. Consider, for example, the sentence *I am sad about John's party getting cancelled*.

- Here, two things enter our common ground based on the utterance: (1) that the speaker is sad (explicitly stated) and (2) that John's party was cancelled (a presupposition).
- One speaker could contest the claim that the party was cancelled; otherwise, the first speaker assumes that the second accepts the claim as part of the ongoing background knowledge of the conversation.
- If we didn't constantly alter the common ground to include things that are not explicitly stated, then we would waste a great deal of time fact-checking and explicitly stating things that common ground allows us to simply assume. In other words, common ground enables us to streamline conversation and, sometimes, to gather information.

### Speech Acts

- *Speech act* theory involves the recognition that when we speak, we don't just make vocal noises; we also perform actions. This idea was first articulated by John Austin in his work *How to Do Things with Words*.
- For example, if you say to a friend, "I bet you \$20 that the 49ers will trounce the Seahawks," the words *I bet you* obligate you to pay \$20 if the 49ers lose. Similarly, the words *I am sorry* perform an act of apology.
- In many cases, such as the performance of a marriage ceremony, we have institutionalized the act performed by speech, requiring an appropriate speaker to make it legitimate.



© Digital Vision/Photodisc/Thinkstock

**Some speech acts require particular participants in specific settings, such as a minister or justice of the peace during a wedding ceremony.**

- To understand the different actions that sentences perform, Austin suggested that there are several types of speech acts associated with every utterance.
  - The *phonic act* merely involves the act of speech itself—making the sounds associated with the words in an utterance.
  - The *locutionary act* refers to the actual meaning of the words uttered.
  - The *illocutionary act* describes the speaker's intended communicative act, such as making a promise or a bet.
  - The *perlocutionary act* refers to whether the listener recognized the speech act's illocutionary force as it was intended by the speaker.
- Of course, the same words can perform different acts, depending on the circumstances in which they are uttered. Also, the same words

uttered by different people can affect whether a speech act will be performed or not.

- Austin also noted that *felicity* or *sincerity conditions* are required for a legitimate speech act to be performed. For example, a catcher in a baseball game can say, “You’re out!” but the conventions of baseball mean that this speech act is not felicitously performed unless the words are spoken by the umpire. Another important criterion for a speech act to be felicitously performed is that the speaker must be sincere and truthful.
- Speakers can perform speech acts either directly or indirectly. In a direct act, the form and function of the sentence are closely matched; for example, *Go pick up the boxes from the office*. Indirect speech acts use a grammatical form that is not a direct fit or match for the utterance function; for example, *Would you mind getting the boxes from the office?* Most of what we say to each other comes in the form of indirect speech acts.

### Conversational Maxims

- How do speakers generally come to make the same inferences in conversations? We base our assumptions on a number of different factors: the context, the participants, the subject, and crucially, the background knowledge about the world that we assume others share.
- But we also come to conversations with the knowledge that language use is governed in principled ways, that we, as rational communicators, must make our conversational contributions make sense, and we make the assumption that others also intend to make sense. With this in mind, we try to assign an appropriate meaning to utterances, even if on the surface, they seem irrelevant in a given context. Thus, indirect speech acts can be interpreted by assuming that we all follow certain shared rules of conversation.
- Essentially, these language rules, referred to as *conversational maxims*, are driven by an overarching principle to be conversationally cooperative. This theory of how we interpret

indirect speech acts based on shared conventions was developed by the linguist H. P. Grice. Grice's four main maxims of conversation describe more specific expectations we bring to conversations.

- The first “rule” Grice proposes is the *maxim of quantity*, which states that a speaker's contribution should be as informative as required but no more so.
  - The second rule is the *maxim of quality*, which states that a speaker's contribution should be truthful and backed by adequate evidence.
  - The *maxim of manner* states that speakers should avoid obscurity and ambiguity and be brief and orderly.
  - Finally, the *maxim of relation* says that contributions should be relevant.
- A key aspect of Grice's theory is that because we have these conventions, violations are meaningful. Thus, we can indirectly state something by flouting (or superficially violating) a maxim. This allows us to make inferences about what people mean because we assume that they are covertly following the maxims.
  - As we've seen, we are not often direct in getting our meaning across, but shared conventions, or conversational maxims, help guide our interpretation of others' speech to ensure that we make reasonable inferences.

### Suggested Reading

Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

Bloomer, Griffiths, and Merrison, “Pragmatics.”

Grice, “Logic and Conversation.”

## Questions to Consider

1. Think about the following exchange:

A: How many children do you have?

B: I have two children.

Later, A finds out that B has three children. Consider whether B's utterance was or was not semantically true. Should A be upset about B's response given this new information?

2. In the example in question 1, assuming the inference of two rather than three was pragmatic rather than semantic, was a maxim of conversation violated?
3. How might the maxims of conversation be culturally variable? Can you think of some examples when, in a cross-cultural context, you might have made the wrong inferences?

# Analyzing Conversation

## Lecture 15

**A**s we learned in our last lecture, semantics and pragmatics provide us with tools to interpret speaker utterances. However, there is still more to what we say beyond either semantically or pragmatically derived meaning. Consider, for example, how you know when it is your turn to talk in a conversation or how you signal another speaker to enter the conversation without disrupting its flow. In other words, there is much we say and do when we converse that requires a basic shared organization to guide us. In this lecture, we will examine the system that makes conversation work, analyzing the basic structure of conversations and taking a close look at our rights and obligations as conversational participants.

### Characteristics of Conversation

- We have conversations so often that it may seem ridiculous to try to identify their characteristics, but conversation is critically different than other kinds of verbal exchange, such as lectures, speeches, or sermons.
- Unlike these other genres of talk, conversation is relatively unplanned and unfolds on a turn-by-turn basis. Conversation is also co-constructed with other speakers, and it is processed and created “online.” It is, not surprisingly, our predominant form of talk.
- The field of conversation analysis is the area of linguistic study devoted to uncovering the regularities behind our everyday talk. Unlike most aspects of linguistics study that focus on analytical units equal to or smaller than a sentence, conversation analysis takes connected discourse larger than the sentence level as its unit of study.

### Conversation Structure

- Many people are surprised to learn the degree of sequential structure there is in the way we construct conversations. According to the

sociologist Erving Goffman, the crucial elements of face-to-face interactions involve openings, turn-taking, closings, listenership cues, and repair sequences.

- In order to understand each other, we must be able to recognize and make sense of interactional moves. The interactionally and locally managed aspect of conversation allows us to make sense of what has come before and to tailor our subsequent moves accordingly.
- We also recognize that listening and speaking requirements are in operation when we converse. To move forward in conversation, we must have some assurance that we have been understood. It is this recognizability and the opportunity to repair and renegotiate meaning as it unfolds that allows us to have successful conversations.
  - For example, when someone asks you a question, you feel obligated to answer. When you engage in a conversation, you have a right to take a conversational turn.
  - In other words, we are aware of interactional rights and obligations in conversation, as well as the order in which they occur.
  - It's disconcerting to receive nothing but silence in response to conversational overtures because we rely on responses to show that we were understood as intended and that listeners are doing their job in the conversation.
- We often focus on what we tell each other as the main goal of conversation. But what we sometimes forget is that how we structure conversation itself indicates a great deal about our underlying intentions beyond what is said. It tells us how, as social actors, we want to be perceived and how we see our roles relative to one another. For this reason, it is important to gain a bit more clarity about the structural mechanisms and socialized patterns that provide the framework for conversational interaction.



## Conversational Analysis

- The field of conversational analysis was introduced by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s. Its goal was to describe both how we organize talk and how we establish meaning through conventions of talk. Our construction of conversation—in particular, its interactivity—is our key means to arrive at inter-subjective understanding. In other words, it is how we “get” each other.
- An important question for conversation analysts is what participants are trying to accomplish in terms of the larger interaction. For instance, does a lack of conversational support indicators (*uh-huh*) during your turn at talk indicate disagreement or disinterest, or does it suggest that you yield the floor? Further, what are your options for dealing with this violation?
- According to conversational analysts, a key aspect of conversation is that it is constructed via *recipient design*, meaning that at each point in talk, we shape our utterances in line with what was just said and who said it. An example is how we often exhibit *repair sequences* during conversation, restating or supplementing information to ensure that our listeners understand our meaning.

## Managing Conversations

- One of the most cited studies in early conversational analysis research is a 1974 paper entitled “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation.” Written by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, the paper explored the systematic approach to turn-taking that operates in spoken conversation.
  - The researchers introduced the notion that conversations were essentially interactionally managed and locally managed, two important concepts for understanding why some conversations seem more successful than others.
  - The idea that conversation is interactionally managed essentially suggests that participants cooperate and jointly construct conversation as it unfolds. It is locally managed in

that it is an ongoing process in which each participant indicates his or her understanding of, and response to, what has gone before and uses this to determine what will come next.

- You have probably never considered how it is that you begin and end conversations or how you manage the turn-taking once engaged. Clearly, there must be some organization to it that we mutually recognize, or we would be talking over one another all the time.



© michaeljung/Stock/Thinkstock

**The act of talking on the phone highlights the underlying order of our conversations: When you answer with “Hello,” you have clear expectations for what comes next.**

- To get an idea about the sequential order informing our talk, consider a time when you felt you were not given an opportunity to take a turn in a conversation. You were probably annoyed by this breaking of an interactional “rule.”
- We recognize that others have rights to talking turns, and if we ourselves are ignored, it suggests that other participants have violated shared conventions for turn-taking.
- *Adjacency pairs* are a primary organizational feature of interactive speech and an important component of how we manage talk. They are essentially any two related utterances that occur in sequential order. In other words, the first part of the adjacency pair imposes a strong expectation for both the existence and the type of the second. Examples include question/answer sequences, greetings, apologies, compliments, and assertions.

- We use adjacency pairs all the time to help structure our conversations. In fact, they help us guide expectations about how a conversation will unfold.
- Thus, if you say something but don't get a response as expected, you get angry because you have opened up an adjacency pair, and your conversational partner ignored it. Much of what we see as rude speech behavior is related to adjacency pair violations.
- But most of the time, we respond appropriately to adjacency pair sequences, and in fact, conversations are typically constructed in large part by the chaining together of such pairs. They help us structure the turns of talk that we need to ensure a successful interaction. Adjacency pairs are also powerful conversational control devices; they both elicit response and constrain what is said.

### **Turn-Taking in Conversations**

- Beyond shaping what is said, we also need rules for how talk will flow. In conversations, we work to ensure that only one party speaks at a time and that speakers change over the course of the conversation. To do this, we have an understanding of how to hold the floor and how to indicate that the floor will soon be available to the next speaker. In other words, our conversations are governed by a conventionalized turn-taking system.
- A turn consists not only of a particular amount of time allocated to a particular speaker but also of speaker rights. We feel we have a right to speak for a certain amount of time and the right not to be displaced by another speaker. Turns have a certain amount of value and, thus, are often sought after by participants in a discourse.
- *Turn transitions* are points in a conversation where we signal that a turn is coming to an end and another speaker can take a turn. These points are typically signaled syntactically, propositionally, or prosodically.

- A syntactic transition involves reaching a point at which the speaker's meaning is complete.
- Propositional signals indicate the end of a description of some state of affairs.
- Prosodic signals refer to a speaker's intonational pattern, with the tone going up or down to mark the end of a turn.
- Turn transition is a bit subjective; thus, it is not unusual to find simultaneous speech or overlap at any potential turn-transition point. This is either because someone erroneously thought the floor was becoming available or because someone decided to make a play for the floor. Either way, only one person will end up with the floor; we rarely sustain simultaneous speech because we recognize its conversational futility.

### **Recording and Transcribing Conversations**

- One of the best ways to reveal the structure of a conversation is to record it, then to carefully examine a transcription of the recorded exchange. This technique is frequently employed in conversation analysis.
- The transcriptions made for conversation analysis reflect not only what is said but also the smaller details of the interaction itself, such as points of overlapping speech, signs of listenership or backchanneling, and so on. All of these provide important information about the goals and relationships of the speakers involved. An excerpt from a sample transcription is shown on the following page.

Bob: So how's it been going?

Sue: =good. You?

Bob: (no pause) Great! But I heard you had an accident.

Sue. Yeah, Nothing too bad, but I fell and broke my ankle so-  
that- is kinda a bummer. Darn kids tied my

(Bob): -oh no!- (backchannel)

(Sue continues) shoelaces together.

Bob: You're kidding! But -it is kinda funny.

Sue: -No, I am ....- (overlapping speech, unsuccessful turn attempt)

Sue: (short pause) Well, I still don't find it funny yet!

- Conversation analysts can identify many significant details with such transcriptions that often go unnoticed in the course of real-time conversation. For example, they can see how turns are allocated among participants, where overlapping speech occurs, how participants provide turn-change opportunities via adjacency pairs, and so on.
- Conversation involves a great deal of give and take; what we say and how we say it are closely tied to the turn that came before. We often fail to recognize that we do not speak in a vacuum but in ways that socially and interactionally tie us to one another. How we

respond—and, sometimes, whether we respond—can show keenly how we manage, engage, and even alter the social order.

### Suggested Reading

Bloomer, Griffiths, and Merrison, “Conversation Analysis.”

Goffman, *Forms of Talk*.

Goodwin and Heritage, “Conversation Analysis.”

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Record a conversation you have with a close friend or significant other. After it is transcribed, consider the following questions:
  - How is conversation a rule-governed activity? How do we structure conversation and perform conversational management? How do conversational participants “work” to initiate, maintain, pursue, and shut down conversation?
  - Are social relationships managed through conversational activity (in terms of how conversation itself is structured and pursued, not topically)? What kinds of social management do you do with conversation? What discourse forms are associated with the following perceptions: friendliness, support, hostility, anger, and indifference?
2. Based on our discussion and your transcript, are power and status realized in conversational management and structure? How is power displayed through conversation? What specific discourse strategies displayed in your text suggest that power and status are being negotiated?

# The Mechanics of Good Conversation

## Lecture 16

**A**s we saw in the last lecture, making successful conversation takes work. Without mutually recognized conventions, we would have conversational chaos. We have already seen that we must follow unstated rules for turn-taking to enable speakers to share the conversational floor and to facilitate comprehension. But we have not yet looked at specific devices used to organize and manage conversations. Although we talk to tell each other things, much of what we say has more to do with social “greasing” than with informational exchange. In this lecture, we will examine questions, interruptions, and backchannels. As we will see, conversational power is crucially involved in this mix and some of us have more opportunity than others to display it.

### Adjacency Pairs

- As we learned in the last lecture, an adjacency pair is essentially an exchange of turns by two conversationalists, with the second turn formatted in some way to respond to the first. Although many different turns put pressure on a co-conversationalist to respond, an explicit question/answer sequence is the classic example of an adjacency pair.
- Questions essentially are statements that require a response from a listener. They are necessarily part of a collaboratively managed conversation. In other words, a question must be understood against a larger conversational framework and, thus, requires at least minimal common ground between participants. It also requires mutual meaning making by the participants in order to formulate a proper response.
- When asked a question, we often feel compelled to answer, but questions don’t actually force answers. Certainly, we have all been in situations where our questions go unanswered. Still, there is strong normative pressure to answer questions. In their book

*Talk in Action*, sociologists John Heritage and Steven Clayman refer to this as “normative accountability.” And they state that questions “invoke a right to an answer and place the recipient under an obligation to respond.”

- The use of a question form also places the recipient in a position where he or she is assumed to have knowledge about something the speaker does not. We typically assume that people don’t ask questions to which they know the answers, unless they have some underlying motive. This, of course, has some implications for how we negotiate power and status in conversation.
  - After all, we spend a great deal of time in our conversations subtly making claims about our relative status. We often position our addressees or ourselves as knowledgeable and frame our talk to reflect this.
  - At other times, we assert solidarity and, as a result, equal status. In other words, even friendly exchanges work to establish power and balance.
- A question is a powerful device to ensure conversational response, and it suggests that the respondent’s answer will be informative in some way. This is why we often respond with a third turn to acknowledge the information received. Such third-part responses indicate what Heritage refers to as a “change in state.”
- Of course, any distribution of power between participants in question/answer sequences varies with the context and goals of the exchange. Institutional use of questions is often from those in more powerful positions than those being asked. Think of courtroom, university, and medical settings. Questions accomplish a great deal in terms of managing institutional goals and are typically asked by the more powerful participant in the interaction.
- Questions are extremely effective ways to exert power. They enact strong normative pressure to respond, and they control the direction of the discourse. This is why in normal conversations, we often use



them as tools to promote conversation from reticent participants. In such cases, less powerful participants can ensure conversational response by utilizing this powerful conversational device.

## Question Forms

- The amount of control exercised by the use of questions depends on the type of question form used. The two basic question structures are *yes/no* and *wh-* word questions. Yes/no questions are of a form that limits the possible responses, such as “Did you get the promotion?” They also have a preferred answer implicit in their use, known as *polarity*.
  - If you affirm the proposition, you can simply respond with “yes.” However, if you answer “no,” you typically provide additional information to explain why you are giving a dispreferred answer; for example, another person got the promotion.
  - In this way, yes/no questions not only offer significant control of the topic, but they also conventionally suggest a preferred answer.
- Some yes/no questions, called *tag questions*, explicitly indicate the preferred answer, exerting even more control over conversational response. For example, someone might ask, “You got the promotion, didn’t you?” Here, the expected response is clearly an affirmation of the proposition, and a negative response is strongly dispreferred. Tag questions usually require a speaker to have authority.
- In contrast, *wh-* word questions, involving *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*, allow the recipient much more freedom in responding. “What did you do last night?” can be answered in many more ways than “Did you go to the movies last night?” and doesn’t suggest a particular answer.

## Interruptions

- Although we use questions a great deal in conversation to structure turn-taking, we don’t always use question/answer sequences to direct conversation. We can also sometimes just jump into a

conversation when we want to, with no direct response to a previous turn and even though our right to do so is not always sanctioned by others.

- The turn-taking mechanism we follow typically works pretty well, but we also pursue other social interests through conversation, particularly the interest in *floor control*—essentially, who has the power to talk. Here, we see a different way of exerting conversational control that is a bit less subtle than asking questions: interruptions.
- Sociologist Emanuel Schegloff defines an interruption as follows: a conversational turn that violates the turn-taking mechanism by vying for the conversational floor outside of a turn-transition point. This is different from an *overlap*, which is essentially a miscue as to the availability of the floor for a new turn. Unlike interruptions, overlaps typically occur at potential turn-transition points.
- Researchers using Schegloff's definition have suggested that we find more interruptions in a number of contexts that suggest an inherent relational asymmetry. For example, research suggests that men more often interrupt women, parents more often interrupt children, and bosses are more likely to interrupt subordinates. Certainly, we have all been interrupted in ways that make us feel as if our speaking turns have been cut off, and we usually view this negatively.
- However, there is also some controversy about how this definition approaches the idea of simultaneous talk and its purpose. Although there is no disagreement that some simultaneous talk is clearly a violation of one's speaking rights, there are differences in how we interpret being interrupted. It is possible to view conversation as a collaborative enterprise, with less focus on floor rights and turn-taking flow. Further, some research indicates that people who are more familiar with each other show greater incidences of overlap and interruption.

- For these reasons, a number of researchers have suggested that Schegloff's structurally based model misses a crucial interpretive aspect to defining interruptions. We cannot discard the notion that taking away one's speaking rights can be an expression of asymmetrical power, but we must examine the context more deeply to understand the roles played by interruptions and speech overlaps.
  - Deborah Tannen, a linguist at Georgetown University, has analyzed what she calls *high-involvement* and *high-considerateness cultures*. In high-involvement cultures, she claims, speech involves a great deal of overlap, fast speaking rates, and not much pause between speaker turns. Tannen suggests that these features provide a sense of solidarity.
  - High-considerateness speakers, in contrast, are more focused on being considerate of others' speaking rights and not imposing on others' turns. Clearly, a high-involvement speaker and a high-considerateness speaker may be at cross purposes when they talk.
- Even with people from similar cultural backgrounds, some simultaneous speech feels intrusive and some feels cooperative. If someone cuts you off and changes the topic, you may feel as if you have been bulldozed, but if someone cuts you off to show that he or she understands what you're saying, you may not mind. Thus, researchers have suggested that we must define interruptive activity both structurally and interpretively, with a category of power-based and non-power-based functions.

## Backchanneling

- Another type of simultaneous talk we experience frequently is called backchanneling, that is, the *mm-hmms*, *uh-huhs*, and *okays* of conversation. Backchannels do not make a play for a speaking turn but essentially show attention to the current speaker's turn. They provide opportunities for collaborative construction of conversation and for real-time disambiguation. In other words, backchanneling functions as part of a feedback loop in the construction of

conversation. It is a key component of local and interactional organization, and it makes the conversational addressee a critical player in the active construction of talk.

- The most frequent function of backchanneling is to encourage a speaker to continue speaking. This type of backchannel essentially maintains the flow of conversation but doesn't necessarily show agreement with what the speaker says. We may use backchannels to show that we share a similar alignment with a speaker or as even more overt markers of agreement. Backchannels can also indicate listener attitude toward what the speaker is saying, displaying surprise, anger, enthusiasm, and so on.
- Not all of the ways in which we backchannel are verbal. For example, we may nod our heads to show listenership with or without simultaneous verbal signs. We can also smile or make facial expressions that perform the same work.
- Although we often think of backchannels as only supportive to ongoing conversation, they can also show disinterest, disagreement, or disengagement. Much of this has to do with the timing and intonational pattern of the backchannel. Frequency of backchannel occurrence during a speaker's turn also affects how we interpret the meaning of a backchannel. Active, frequent backchanneling encourages a speaker to continue, while infrequent or delayed backchanneling may indicate indifference or inattention.
- Curiously, we rarely overtly recognize how much conversational support backchanneling provides until we are in a situation where we don't receive it. Again, this can be problematic when different cultural norms or expectations for backchanneling cues clash. A number of researchers have looked into how speakers from different countries vary in their use of backchanneling. Japanese speakers, for example, use longer, more frequent backchannels and less emotive ones than American speakers.

- Mismatches in frequency and type of conversational features, such as overlap and backchanneling, can change the way we perceive people and events. But in fact, our judgments about whether speakers from different backgrounds are rude or polite may simply be a matter of conversational conventions rather than personality.

## Suggested Reading

Heritage and Clayman, “Talking Social Institutions into Being.”

Li, “Cooperative and Intrusive Interruptions in Inter- and Intra-Cultural Dyadic Discourse.”

## Questions to Consider

1. What makes a good listener? If you had to list specific qualities, what would they be? Before this lecture, how would backchanneling fit in?
2. Observe a conversation in a public place between two speakers of a different language. Even without speaking the language, you can notice the degree of overlap and backchanneling they use. How would you characterize it compared to English speakers?
3. Return to the transcript of a conversation you recorded for the last lecture and consider the following questions. Chart the use of the conversational features discussed in this lecture by speaker and function.
  - How did adjacency pairs, such as greetings, requests, and questions, structure the conversation?
  - Who controlled the adjacency pairs in terms of topic introduction and the use of questions?
  - Did you ask the questions or mainly respond?
  - What structural forms of questions were used most often, and how were they distributed across participants?

- Where was there overlap in the conversation, and did it effect a change in speaker turn?
- Can you identify different functions for interruptions in the conversation?
- How did interruptions differ, and what might lead you to interpret them as support versus power plays?
- Did you find yourself feeling interrupted or did your conversational participant? In other words, are you high involvement or low involvement in your conversational approach?

# Mind Your Manners—Politeness Speech

## Lecture 17

**A**s we've learned, when we enter into conversations, we have quite a playbook to follow. We have maxims that guide how we produce and interpret what is said; turn-taking mechanisms that allow for orderly conversation; and specific features, such as adjacency pairs and backchanneling, that help to ensure conversational continuity. Conversation opens up wonderful possibilities in terms of what we can accomplish with words, but it also involves negotiation and the potential for imposing on one another. In this lecture, we will look at how we balance our need to be liked with our need not to be bothered in our interactions with others—in other words, we'll analyze language and politeness as necessary bedfellows.

### Politeness Theory

- We have all been in situations in which we want to be nice and agreeable, but we also don't want to put ourselves out or feel obligated to do something we don't want to do. We have a deep-seated need to communicate in a way that makes people like us, but we also want to limit the imposition that others place on us or that we place on others. How do we conversationally negotiate our way through such minefields?
- In addition to having underlying rules for structuring conversations so that they move along in an orderly fashion, our linguistic interactions are also governed by what is referred to as *politeness theory*.
- The theoretical concept of politeness is a bit different than the everyday idea of politeness in that a theory of politeness must try to present a model for examining politeness across different cultures and help uncover any universal principles that underlie politeness, regardless of cultural norms.

## Why Are We Polite?

- Politeness theory recognizes the fact that many of our speech acts, such as apologies, compliments, greetings, and insults, help us manage interpersonal relationships and avoid conflict. The development of this framework draws strongly on the theories about self-presentation and social interaction introduced by Erving Goffman.
- Goffman suggested that at least to some degree, we are all cognizant of how we are perceived by others and try to present a positive self-image. This self-image is part of what is called *face*, or essentially, our social worth. If we lose face, our self-image is affected. Thus, we make social moves aimed at maintaining face.
- Goffman's work recognizes that the need for social connection underscores most of our conversational interactions. In other words, we want people to like and respect us, and we want to like and respect others. It is this desire that essentially motivates our attention to face and, as a result, to politeness.
- We may not want to admit it, but we all want to be admired and to share a sense of community with others. At the same time, we don't want to be unduly burdened by the needs of others or have our sense of self compromised. There can be a tension between these needs during conversational interactions. In linguistics, these needs—for solidarity and for independence—are called *face needs*.



**We may compliment or applaud others as a way of expressing solidarity rather than honest admiration.**

© Wavebreakmedia Ltd/Wavebreak Media/Thinkstock.



It is through conversational face work that we attend to the face needs of others, and they attend to ours.

### **Positive and Negative Face**

- Almost all speech acts carry with them inherent threats to face, but politeness helps us avoid these landmines. We generally strive to avoid face-threatening acts that place us in a bad social position or burden us unnecessarily. This is why, for example, we use *please* and *thank you* when we make requests; we recognize that we are imposing on others, which may be viewed as threatening to their face needs.
- In their influential theory, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson posit two kinds of face: positive and negative.
  - Positive face encompasses the need to feel liked and appreciated, to show identification with others, and to express a common ground. Attention to positive face comes in the form of positive politeness—strategies that emphasize our solidarity or show appreciation for our addressees or their possessions and actions.
  - Negative face, in contrast, is the need not to be imposed on, to have the right to autonomy, and to have one's individual personality respected. Attention to negative face involves negative politeness strategies, such as acknowledging an imposition behind a request: "I hate to bother you, but ...."
- Speech acts, such as offers, criticisms, requests, and even the acceptance of gratitude or an apology, all carry possible negative face threats. They can all impinge on freedom of action or tarnish the recipient's self-image.
  - For example, an offer can be a face-threatening act because to the recipient, it may be perceived as an obligation. We may refuse offers because we don't want to impose on others, recognizing their negative face, or potentially obligate ourselves, protecting our own negative face.

- When the potential for a face-threatening act arises, we tend to dig ourselves linguistically out of the hole by mitigating and softening what we say to make it more palatable. For example, someone might say, “You’d be doing me a favor if you would ....”

### Indirect and Direct Strategies

- When we interact, we must weigh our options for straightforwardness versus social appropriateness. Rarely do we use bald, or *on-record*, means of asking, imposing, or criticizing. Instead, we generally evaluate the threat a certain linguistic course of action will pose to our face and construct our utterances accordingly.
  - Indirectness is also often used to address someone else’s negative face. A linguistic strategy that tries to lessen a face-threatening act by being indirect is referred to as an *off-record strategy*. Typically, we see indirectness as a negative quality, but indirectness is often our first line of defense linguistically in getting something done while being polite.
  - Indirectness works because it gives the addressee an out by providing one of several possible interpretations of what you’re saying. Of course, it also increases ambiguity.
- When we converse, we say things that make others feel good—addressing positive face—and things that may make others feel uncomfortable or put upon—threatening their negative face. How we choose to say things is always a balance between our face needs and those of our addressees. Thus, we have a variety of ways to say things depending on how we judge the specific context. On-record and off-record strategies are two of these approaches.

### Making Requests

- As mentioned, making a request threatens an addressee’s negative face. Thus, we perform face work in such interactions to maximize the potential for fulfillment of our requests.

- The amount of face work involved varies depending on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. If the request is minor or to someone you know well, you will likely have to do only a little face work to accomplish your goal. If, however, you don't know your listener well or the request is large, more face work will be needed.
- Consider, for example, the difference between asking a stranger for the time versus asking someone to take the middle seat on an airplane so that you can sit with your spouse. One request is easy to grant, while the other has a significant chance of being refused.
  - In the first case, you would probably ask, "Could you tell me the time?" The use of a question form recognizes that you are imposing on someone, addressing his or her negative face. However, it is not highly mitigated because it is not typically a major face-threatening act to ask for the time.
  - In the second case, recognizing the degree of imposition and the need to provide the hearer with a non-face-threatening response option, you might be more cautious about how you made your request. You might preface the request with an explanation of your reasons for imposing and suggest that the stranger is kind to even consider it. You might also use redress strategies that recognize the imposition of your request.

### **Face in the Workplace**

- In every social interaction, we evaluate the threat our social moves make to our own and our addressee's face. If we know someone well, we tend not to feel as worried about causing offense, and we may be less polite in how we communicate potentially face-threatening acts. In situations where one person has authority over another, such as in a workplace, the authority figure is less likely to worry about his or her subordinate's face.
- A workplace maintains hierarchy, which by its very nature, involves impinging on one's freedom to act unhindered and the potential for face loss in everyday interactions, such as critiquing, requesting,

and disagreeing. Politeness allows us to defuse these potentially threatening situations by showing consideration for others in how something is phrased.

- According to Brown and Levinson's theory, power is instrumental in shaping how people interact. The more social distance, the greater the power imbalance and face risk in a given encounter; thus, the more politeness a speaker will use. Because distance and power are integral to most organizations and institutions, politeness is used to maintain workplace social structures.
- According to the theory, we should expect that subordinates, having less power and greater social distance from superiors, would use more politeness features. This approach would work as an offset to the potential face-threatening acts that often occur when making requests or disagreeing.
  - Not surprisingly, some research into the distribution of politeness strategies has in fact suggested that lower-status individuals rely on politeness features more than higher-status participants.
  - However, the use of politeness is not unequivocally tied to power per se but to the perception of power. In a workplace culture that attempts to minimize subordinates' sense of relative rank, politeness might also be a means to level the perception of the power superiors hold.

### **Cultural Values and Face**

- Brown and Levinson suggested that the concept of face is universal, but this claim has been modified to some extent to recognize the fact that cultural values play a significant role in how such features are constructed and used in discourse.
- For example, some cultures, such as Russian or Polish, prefer direct over indirect strategies; this is in marked contrast to American culture, which tends to be quite indirect. Thus, the rate of direct speech acts, including imperatives and assertions, is greater than in such languages as English, where interrogative forms are preferred.

- How politeness is represented within language systems also varies. Honorific languages, such as Japanese and Korean, have politeness encoded into the grammatical system itself. Honorifics typically involve choices in pronouns, nouns, verb forms, and other types of distance markers that indicate status differences between participants in a conversation.
- Although specific strategies and motivations for politeness might vary cross-culturally, the need for politeness to avoid conflict and get things done is nearly universal.

### Suggested Reading

Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*.

Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Morand, “Language and Power.”

Ogiermann, “Politeness and In-Directness across Cultures.”

### Questions to Consider

1. If you were to ask someone to loan you money, how would it vary based on:
  - How well you knew that person?
  - Your relative status (for example, a professor to a student, a child to a parent)?
  - How much money you were asking for?

2. Arrange the following examples in order from most to least polite:
  - a. Can I borrow a couple quarters for the meter? I'm sure you know how it is when you're running late!
  - b. I am so sorry to even ask you, but I forgot my wallet this morning, and I just need a few quarters for the meter. Might you possibly have a couple quarters that I could borrow?
  - c. Hey, I need a few quarters for the meter.
  - d. Excuse me, sir, do you happen to have a couple quarters I could borrow for the meter? I would be so grateful.
  - e. Darn! I forgot my wallet, and I don't have any quarters for the meter!
3. In the examples in question 2, identify the different politeness strategies used in terms of direct/indirect strategies and whether they appeal to the addressee's positive or negative face.
4. Go back to the transcript of a conversation you made in an earlier lecture. What types of politeness features can you identify in the transcript? Do both you and your addressee seem to be aware of face needs and wants? If you disagree at some point, how is this constructed in light of the potential face threat it presents? Similarly, were any offers or requests made? If so, what kinds of politeness strategies were used?

# Linguistic Style and Repertoire

## Lecture 18

In daily life, we talk about style as a way to indicate that certain aspects of the way someone dresses, walks, and interacts somehow uniquely identify that person. Linguists also talk about speakers' styles, but they use the term a bit differently. In linguistics, each speaker is said to have a *linguistic repertoire*, which simply means that we vary our speech in ways that are sensitive to various conversational events. This is similar to what we do with fashion; we dress differently for different occasions and to suit different moods. Our choices in clothes can shift the way we are perceived, and like clothes, speech options can be combined to give different impressions of ourselves.

### Linguistic Style

- A collection of linguistic features that has come to be socially recognized is referred to as *linguistic style*. Many of our ideas of linguistic style, such as those of a valley girl or a Southerner, are greatly exaggerated social representations, yet they rely on some aspect of speech that we have all come to see as symbolic.
- Most of the time, our style is not stereotypically recognizable but still displays a particular social identity that is relevant within our speech communities.
  - For example, Southern California young, hip style is likely to involve fronted back vowels, such as “be-uwɪ” or “cul,” and glottalized /t/ sounds in such words as *right* or *might*.
  - These linguistic features don't carry the extreme social connotations of the valley girl's *gag me with a spoon*, and each is found individually in a number of different social contexts. But put together, they often characterize the speech of young Californian females.

- By the same token, a professional woman who is also a mother may vary her speech depending on whether she is speaking to another mother at her children's school or to someone in her office. With another mother, she may use more informal word choice, contractions, and such phrase markers and hedges as *you know* or *sorta*. At work, she may use noncontracted forms, more educated words, and so on.
  - These differences contribute to certain social identities that are recognizable by others in the community because they assign similar meaning to the variants selected.
  - In other words, each of these variants takes on both a social meaning and a linguistic one, and speakers use this flexibility to highlight certain identities over others.
- Different styles are not inauthentic but part of the range of identities we all express. All of us can think of similar examples of how we present ourselves differently in different contexts and for different goals. This is part of what makes speech integral to building and maintaining relationships and getting things accomplished.

### Linguistic Repertoire

- Almost all the variants we have discussed show the same sensitivity to context. This creates what we refer to as our *linguistic repertoire*, or the range of linguistic variation found within an individual speaker's system.
- Your repertoire exists because all speech events are not equal. You have learned that you must adjust your speech to match what's expected in specific contexts. In other words, you portray different aspects of your personality depending on the situation. This ability to project different styles is part of what makes us members of a speech community. It assumes that we recognize contexts—and their linguistic effects—in basically the same way and as requiring similar types of speech.



- In linguistics, a speaker's style is the collection of different linguistic features used to present the speaker in a specific way in a specific context. All of us have a range of linguistic options to say the same thing but to convey different social connotations. Each of us varies along a continuum in terms of how much or how little we use particular sets of options depending on the circumstances; this forms our linguistic repertoire.
- The range of a speaker's repertoire depends a great deal on the social characteristics we've discussed in earlier lectures, such as gender, age, ethnicity, social class and so on.
  - For example, at dinner with a close childhood friend, an American speaker will use more contracted forms (*gonna*, *can't*), delete more sounds ("spose" versus "suppose"), and increase levels of palatalization ("doncha" for "don't you").
  - Using all these variants simultaneously at a high frequency compared to, say, a speaker's workday speech shifts his or her style significantly. Further, stylistic variation in different contexts indicates that we know we are being evaluated by others and that we understand how social meaning is assigned.

### **Studying Linguistic Style**

- The earliest sociolinguistic studies conceptualized style primarily as a response to contextual formality or a speaker's attention to speech. In such studies, researchers recorded speakers in contexts that varied in the degree of formality typically required.
  - As the context increased the amount of focus a speaker put on a linguistic task (such as reading text aloud versus engaging in a casual interview), his or her speech features were often altered in the direction of more standard forms.
  - The degree to which such features shift is a factor of gender and class, but all speakers shift in the same direction. This suggests a community-wide recognition of what style is appropriate in what context.

- More recent studies of style suggest that we are not as static in our presumption of what features mean as those early studies sometimes assumed. In other words, in a testing situation, it is likely that people adhere to norms of standard/nonstandard speech and will adjust accordingly when asked to pay close attention to what they are saying. However, in face-to-face interactions, style might not be so simple, and the same features may carry or index different social meanings beyond formality and informality.
- Our linguistic style is actually quite complex, and it may be more accurate to think of speech features as calling on an *indexical field*, where multiple social meanings are intertwined and available for use. The idea of an indexical field simply suggests that we draw on a field of potential meanings triggered by the use of a linguistic feature. These meanings are established through experience and use but are not fixed in the same way as the literal meanings of words.
- Again, the concept of the speech community becomes important here because it is only through social engagement and interaction that various meanings are established. But this more sophisticated treatment of style makes it easier to understand why some speech features show different rates of use even when formality/informality is not particularly relevant.
- Some approaches to the study of linguistic style have suggested that the audience, or the other participants beyond the speaker in a conversation, is crucially part of what determines the linguistic style that will be adopted.

### Occupational Speech

- Occupation is another interesting influence on speech style, although we rarely realize the many ways in which our occupations affect how we speak.
- Perhaps the least surprising influence our work has on our speech is in occupation-specific terminology, or *jargon*. Such terminology

marks in-group versus out-group status, meaning that you have to be a member of a certain profession to know it.

- In addition to particular words being recognizable aspects of specific types of work, we also recognize particular styles of speech as emerging from the work we do. The repetitive and shared nature of both the tasks we perform and the contexts associated with those tasks gives rise to shared vocabulary and styles of speaking.



**Professional jargon is often specialized and field specific, but it may spread beyond its initial field of use, as has happened with computer terminology.**

- For example, airline pilots frequently interact with control tower personnel and other pilots. As a result, they use occupationally specific jargon and understand how to communicate with their associates in occupationally specific ways, such as when taking off or approaching an airport.
- These interactional characteristics and styles become routinized and recognizable.
- Although *jargon* refers mainly to shared vocabulary, sometimes the way language is used in a larger sense becomes recognizable as associated with a specific profession. For example, we all recognize the genre of police interrogations, religious sermons, or courtrooms. A speaking style associated with a specific occupation is called a *professional register*.
  - Registers arise to serve both efficiency and solidarity. Our use of routinized speech and specialized jargon that others we work

with understand speeds up communication; we don't need to explain things or risk misunderstanding. Further, people outside the profession can rapidly identify that we belong in a certain role.

- Using a professional register also highlights our shared experience and establishes rapport among those involved in similar activities. This is why sports teams and army units often use a particular register that identifies and bonds group members and, at the same time, marks those not in the group.
- Often we don't notice the use of a professional register because we have become so accustomed to hearing it and expecting it in certain contexts, but we certainly note when it is absent. For example, if the mechanic fixing your car tells you that a "doohickey" in the engine seems to be loose, you may take your business elsewhere. Part of the use of register is to show that you belong in a certain role and to get people to take you seriously.
- Medicine and law are two professions that are widely studied in terms of the way their register and jargon shape the interactions between doctors and lawyers and the rest of us. In fact, a great deal of linguistic research on language and occupation has focused on the language of doctors and lawyers and its gatekeeping and distributional properties.
  - Two linguists, William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins, found that the roles participants played in courtroom interaction influenced the type of speech they used. Nonexpert witnesses, for example, used more hedges (*I think* or *maybe*) and intensifiers (*very* or *so*) than expert witnesses and attorneys.
  - These differences in courtroom communication had significant effects on the perceived credibility of testimony. Listeners in a subsequent experiment heard testimony from the same speaker using a powerless or powerful style based on the features just mentioned. Use of the powerful style made listeners find witnesses more convincing, trustworthy, and believable.

- The use of professional register is just one aspect of our shifting linguistic style. As we've seen, we can represent different aspects of our identities by shifting our speech in specific ways. It is the confluence of linguistic features shifting in recognizable ways that indexes different senses of ourselves and is socially meaningful to those in our speech communities.

### Suggested Reading

Johnstone, "Uses of Southern-Sounding Speech by Contemporary Texas Women."

Kiesling, "Men's Identities and Sociolinguistic Variation."

Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*.

Rampton, *Crossing*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Think about your linguistic repertoire. What aspects of stylistic variation do you use? Can you think about the specific contexts or audiences that trigger this variation?
2. Is there a jargon or register associated with any occupation or group you belong to? What are its characteristics? What purpose does it serve in those groups?
3. Think about constraints on your repertoire. For instance, when might you ever use linguistic features that are not "natural" to you, such as multiple negation (*He don't do nothing*) or /r/-less speech (*I nevah!*). What work are you performing by appropriating non-native dialect features?

# The Gender Divide in Language

## Lecture 19

A great many conversational breakdowns are blamed on male/female differences. It's easy to fall back on our beliefs about men and women to explain our failures to communicate, but we need to look at how we come to have such associations and how valid they may be. In this lecture, we will try to sort out some of the myths from realities and see if we can identify a better way to approach conversation across the perceived gender divide. We need to shift away from assuming that biology drives language choice. Instead, we will examine the role that societal norms and experiences play in shaping the conversational patterns of men and women.

### Gender Differences in Speech

- The fact that we can usually guess a person's gender from his or her voice alone is one obvious difference between men's and women's speech. We also sometimes get a "sense" about people from hearing them speak. For example, a breathy voice is often construed as sexy or alluring and is most frequently associated with females. Clearly, we attach judgments to particular vocal features depending on whether they are used by a man or a woman. In other words, we have a great deal of social baggage tied up with voice, but most of our beliefs are not solidly based on biology.
- Given that stereotypes about how men and women speak are not often empirically supported, what does the pervasiveness of these stereotypes reveal about our society?
  - Think about the fact that we often characterize women's talk as chatty or gossipy, and we may believe that women talk a lot. In contrast, we sometimes characterize a man as "the strong, silent type." These common associations relegate women's words to the superficial and unimportant, while men's speech is valued as a select and rare commodity. But in fact, quite a few studies suggest that it is actually men who dominate conversations.

- Our comments reveal that we privilege certain ideological relationships between language use and gender that reflect our underlying prejudices about the relative merit of men's and women's talk.
- Gender is an extremely important category in our society. From the very beginning of life, being male or female assigns you membership to one of two major social groups and all the associated experiences and expectations that come with it. And language, both in how we construct and how we conceive it, plays a significant role in marking the division between the groups.

### **Studies of Language and Gender**

- Probably our earliest data on gendered language come from the Carib Indians of the Lesser Antilles in the West Indies. Early European explorers claimed that Carib men and Carib women spoke completely different languages. Unfortunately, because we have no records of early Carib, this is hard to substantiate. Further, because such an extreme linguistic situation has never since been evidenced, it is unlikely a fully accurate account.
- We can't be certain about either the origin or the degree of difference in male and female speech among the Carib, but the sex-exclusive use of linguistic forms is not limited to that group. A number of other languages, including several Native American languages, show systems differentiated by gender. Some contemporary languages, such as Japanese, also show patterns of different grammatical forms for men and women.
- A watershed moment in the study of gendered differences in language came in 1975, when a well-known linguist, Robin Lakoff, published a book entitled *Language and Woman's Place*. Lakoff suggested that women were forced to use language that "softened" or "weakened" their speech, not because of inferior intellect but because of their lower-status social position.

- As Lakoff saw it, women's speech, by necessity, had to be more standard, softer, and more polite than men's to get the same thing done.
- Lakoff proposed what has come to be known as the *dominance theory* behind male and female language differences. This theory suggests that differences in speech related to gender are a result of men's socially superior position, which essentially allows men to wield linguistic control.
- This linguistic dominance was claimed to come in the form of men's greater use of interruptive behavior, fewer conversational support indicators, fewer mitigated directives, and more control over conversational topics. Women, in contrast, have less success with such features, instead needing to show more conversational responsiveness and to be less direct.
- As a result, Lakoff suggested that women use greater numbers of hedges, tag questions, and other indirect linguistic features. Such features make their speech seem weaker and more uncertain in response to the power imbalance between men and women. She also believed that these features were part of what it meant to learn to "speak like a woman" in our society.
- Lakoff's book started a flood of research on the features she named as typical of women's and men's speech. Much of this research suggested that her claims about these specific features were either overstated or incorrect.
  - However, this lack of empirical support is not proof that men and women are socially and linguistically equivalent. In reality, it has more to do with what the fact that linguistic features themselves mean nothing; instead, it is the framework in which they are used that contextualizes their interpretation.
  - There is nothing inherent in a linguistic feature that makes it good or bad, weak or strong; instead, how its use is perceived is based on our social preconceptions. Similarly, although



some gender differences have been found, how they are perceived is embedded in social practice rather than a direct result of gender itself.

- A great deal of research on gender and language has followed since the work of Lakoff and others. One paradigm shift has been to change the focus from biological sex, that is, simply being male or female at birth, to that of gender, the socialized process of becoming male or female. The formation of gendered identity is not a straight path, and the inconsistent correlation of linguistic data with sex—the biological category—has suggested that we must focus more on lifestyle patterns and environment than on biology.

### Origins of Gendered Language Use

- Recent research suggests that the socialization into gendered linguistic practice begins at birth. For example, in one 1976 study, babies were found to babble in different pitch ranges depending on whether they were interacting with their mothers or their fathers. Other studies have found that parents direct speech differently to boys and girls.
- In addition to how they interact with adults, children often enter into sex-segregated activities, playgroups, and sports. Though children have opportunities to engage with opposite-sex peers, research suggests a strong tendency to orient toward more same-sex interaction and play as children age, and this same-sex preference may help create gendered patterns in language use. In



© Andrew Olney/Photodisc/Thinkstock.

**Research shows that parents use more emotion words and more diminutives when talking to girls and more prohibitive speech when talking to boys.**

this view, differences arise from socialization into different gender subcultures. This approach to male/female language differences is known as the *cross-cultural miscommunication approach*.

- The dominance theory discussed earlier assumes an asymmetrical status between men and women and claims that this asymmetry creates the differences we find in language.
- In contrast, the cross-cultural miscommunication approach suggests that gender differences are similar to cross-cultural differences. In other words, men's and women's speech differ mainly because they orient toward different styles of talk as children and continue this into later life.
- In an influential article in 1982, Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker suggested that men adopt a more competitive, hierarchical style, while women engage in a more cooperative, noncompetitive style. These styles are a result of socialized behavior preferences learned early in life and affect language choices within same-sex interactions.
  - The result is that males use more directives, storytelling, and ritual insults to gain and hold the conversational floor, while females use more mitigation, minimal responses, and support strategies to establish rapport and equality. These differences can cause miscommunication that is similar to cultural misunderstanding.
  - Thus, problems in cross-gender interaction can be blamed on differences in gender subcultures. By being more aware of such differences, Maltz and Borker suggest, we can be more sensitive to each other's styles and strategies.

### Contemporary Views and Research

- The cross-cultural miscommunication approach was quick to catch on because it seems to confirm many of our beliefs about, and experiences with, gendered interactions. However, a deeper look at its claims and what it misses suggests that such an essentialist position is hard to maintain.

- The cross-cultural view recognizes the fact that men's and women's experiences are different and may lead to different linguistic tendencies. But its main weakness is that it fails to recognize that the linguistic choices of men and women are tied to a larger social and economic framework.
- It's not just about socializing with same-sex friends; our individual experiences are shaped by how we are engaged in a particularized social order, and this influences our normative options.
- Most contemporary work on language and gender tries to examine how linguistic choices are tied to the larger society in which we operate.
  - Modern research has found, for example, that gendered roles in the workplace tend to position women more in the standard language market. In other words, the types of work women historically have done as caregivers, educators, maids, hostesses, and mothers have made access to standard language more requisite and expected. This relationship, however, is not consistent. When women lack access to education and employment opportunities, they often don't have access to standard language forms either.
  - As more women enter traditionally male jobs, it is likely that their language use will shift to reflect the different patterns of engagement found in such social networks. However, they will probably not use as many nonstandard features or taboo words as men in similar positions because they will still face societal beliefs about how women should talk.
- The relationship between language and gender is a complicated one and rests greatly on social practice. Insofar as women's social roles and ecological opportunities are similar, we should not be surprised if similar linguistic strategies are adopted. However, when society changes, we find that it is not gender that creates the differences; it is the fact of being a social actor playing a particularized role.

## Suggested Reading

Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips. “Sex, Syntax and Semantics.”

Haas, “Men’s and Women’s Speech in Koasati.”

O’Barr and Atkins. “‘Women’s Language’ or ‘Powerless Language’?”

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, “Gender and Language Variation,” in *American English*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Have you ever blamed conversational problems on language differences between men and women? What specifically did you suggest was at fault?
2. Look around over the next couple of days and note the number of ways in which we construct a dichotomy between male and female, for example, separate men’s and women’s bathrooms, different shoe size conventions, and so on. Try to look past such obvious ways we divide up the world toward more subtle indicators of “difference” around us.
3. Why is it so important to fit into a gendered self (and associated language use)? What do we have to lose if we do not conform?

# Ethnic Identity and Language

## Lecture 20

Many social forces contribute to the dialect diversity we find in the world around us—immigration, war, colonization, shifts in historical boundaries, and so on—and such forces bring people with different cultures and language backgrounds together. This contact creates a number of opportunities for the emergence of new dialects, often developing particular features that identify speakers from different backgrounds as distinct in some way. Such dialects are referred to as *ethnolects*. Which ethnolects are salient in a particular society will vary based on historical and social factors. In this lecture, we will examine African American English and discuss factors that may change the future of this ethnolect.

### Defining *Ethnicity*

- For most of us, ethnicity is a label we use to group people we consider similar in culture, background, or custom. But the concept of ethnicity also seems to include a number of other aspects, including a sense of where we came from prior to being where we are now and the idea of shared ancestral roots.
- As the term *ethnicity* is used in the United States, it generally refers to more than simply having origins outside of this nation. It also seems to involve some construction of group identity and group reference—a sense of belonging or fitting in with one particular group in contrast to another.
- Language may be a vital part of some cultural practices, but the language of one's ancestors often becomes less defining of an ethnic group over time. As more group members are born into a new geographic and social context, they shift to the dominant language. For many second- and third-generation speakers, distinctive linguistic features form a unique dialect, rather than a completely separate language. Use of this variety, rather than a different

language, may continue to mark them as members of an ethnic group,

- Ethnic boundaries are often fluid over time. Some once-ethnically salient groups assimilate across time (for example, Irish-Americans), while other groups maintain or even increase in ethnic and cultural salience (for example, many Native American groups). However, ethnic boundaries are not only self-selected. External groups play a role in determining what counts as an ethnic group at different periods in time.
- Regardless of this fluidity and vagueness in definition, ethnicity certainly appears to play a strong role in linguistic variation. It is not uncommon to hear speech varieties described as Italian English, Chicano English, Jewish English, Vietnamese English, and of course, African American English (AAE). All these labels suggest that a specific speech variety is somehow part and parcel of how we identify ethnic membership.



© Jupiterimages/Stockbyte/Thinkstock.

**The Spanish language is symbolically a crucial part of a *quinceañera*—a cultural practice that reflects a Latin American heritage.**

### Characteristics of Ethnic Dialects

- Ethnic varieties are typically user related rather than use related. In other words, we associate them with a speaker, not a context. A use-related variety, such as legal English, is used by people in particular situations as part of a particular role or position they undertake. Use-related varieties are accessible to anyone who assumes the role requiring them. In contrast, user-related varieties are typically inherited by speakers.

- How do such varieties form? When surrounded by a different cultural group, ethnic groups tend to form subcultures, and language generally constitutes part of the distinctiveness of these subcultures.
- Various types of linguistic contact situations play a role in establishing different types of residual dialect features.
  - For example, in cases where a native language comes into contact with a new language, the learning process itself may involve the carryover of features from the original language onto the newly acquired language system—an effect known as *language transfer*.
  - The residue of such language contact may disappear with second-generation speakers, or it may take on meaning as a group identity feature and become part of a dialect.
- In many cases, the source of difference between varieties is not directly traceable to a native language but is a separate development from the language transfer process. This is especially true with second- or third-generation speakers. Social and sometimes geographic isolation may lead to the development of linguistic features similar to the dialect formation processes we discussed in an earlier lecture. In such cases, we may find different uses of a feature shared by the two varieties or new features that develop in one variety but not another.
- Though we may recognize ethnic variation, it's not so easy to identify how ethnic group membership contributes to dialect variation, in part because there is significant overlap with other sociological categories, such as class, age, and region. This complicates the picture of which features are actually ethnically based.
  - For example, the history of AAE is shared with Southern dialects more generally; thus, teasing out the relationship of Southern and ethnic features is fairly complex. Similarly, Cajun English may have French substrate influence, but it is also a Southern dialect.

- For this reason, ethnic dialects may have shared local characteristics that become identified as features identifying members of that group if they move elsewhere. This is what has happened, for example, with such features as the *pin/pen* merger and other Southern features that have been retained in AAE dialects outside the South.

### African American Dialects of English

- Although we often think of features of AAE as being quite distinct from those of white dialects, what is actually unique about AAE is the concurrence of features rather than simply unique features. In fact, it is fairly difficult to find a dialect feature in AAE that is not also found in other American dialects, most often Southern.
- Because of this similarity to features found in other dialects, it is not unusual to find Standard English (SE) speakers believing that there are no underlying rules to AAE. Compared to SE norms, these differences seem to simply be errors or to signal a lack of education in the proper use of forms. However, AAE is driven by linguistic rules and, in fact, is as linguistically sophisticated as any other dialect of English.
- Some of the more well-known phonological features of AAE include the following:
  - Pronunciation of /th/ sounds as /t/ or /d/ in the initial position (“day” for “they”) and as /f/ or /v/ in the medial or final position (“baf” for “bath”). This feature is variably found in many other English dialects besides AAE.
  - Consonant cluster reduction (“tes” for “test”). This reduction is present in every dialect of English but is more frequent in AAE than in Standard dialects. It is also extremely rule governed; it is much less likely to occur if the next words starts with a vowel and more likely to occur where no meaning loss will result.



- Deletion of /r/ (“doe” for “door”). Again, this feature is found in several other dialects, and the rule governing /r/ deletion in AAE is much the same as that in other English dialects.
- Even more than phonology, AAE is characterized by salient syntactic and morphological features. Like phonology, though, the features typically associated with AAE are driven by specific rules and are simply reflections of different ways linguistic change is realized over time. These morphosyntactic features include the following:
  - Multiple or double negation (“He don’t do nothing”); often referred to by linguists as *negative concord*. Like several of the phonological features, multiple negation is not a feature exclusive to AAE and, in fact, is standard in such languages as Italian and French.
  - Deletion of the plural and third-person singular –s marker (“three dollar” or “he go”). The deletion process at work here is not unlike the increasing use of *who* for *whom* in spoken SE or the regularization of such irregular verb forms as *dived* for *dove*. These are simply continuations of historical processes that gave us the speech we have today.
- In discussing phonological and morphosyntactic features, it’s important to recognize two facts: (1) The features of AAE are not mistakes but rule-governed, systematic processes, and (2) these processes differ little from those found in other languages and in SE.

## The Origins and Future of AAE

- As far as we can tell, AAE seems to have begun in the South during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Migration patterns then sent its speakers northward (and, eventually, westward) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This migratory history explains the similarity in features found in AAE across the United States. It also explains AAE’s affinity with more widely found Southern features, such as /ay/ monophthongization and the *pin/pen* merger.

- But how did AAE come to exist in the first place? There are two main theories about the potential origin for this unique dialect.
  - The *Anglicist position* holds that there are no features in AAE that can't be located in some early-source British or Scots-Irish dialect that came to the United States, particularly the South. When non-English-speaking slaves were brought over from Africa, they interacted with and learned English from speakers of British origin. As a result, they acquired the same dialect as those speakers. This explains the similarity we find between many Southern varieties, such as Appalachian speech, and AAE.
  - The *creolist position* holds that AAE is descended from West African languages spoken by slaves. This theory suggests that slaves who used related but different languages developed a limited *pidgin language* that ultimately became a *creole* (with a more extensive linguistic system) in the next generation of speakers. Over time, as a result of contact with English, this language has de-creolized to the point that it resembles just another dialect of American English.
- From some limited sources, such as slave narratives and letters from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, linguists are able to reconstruct some sense of the time depth of features and the historical origin of AAE. However, because of continued contact with other English varieties and changes over time, these sources do not clearly point to which theory is most likely. Probably both British English and a substrate influence from African languages had a hand in shaping the AAE we find today.
- Several major factors have affected the recent and continuing development of AAE. In the middle to late 1900s, many African Americans moved to urban areas and lived under conditions of racial separation, maintaining a distinct ethnolinguistic variety. In the face of racism and segregation, there was little to suggest that dialects found within urban enclaves would move toward more shared features with white varieties of English.

- Current AAE appears to be a supra-regional norm, meaning that core traits are shared by most AAE speakers, regardless of where they live. In fact, some features seem to have intensified as a result of increased inter-ethnic contact and maintenance of historical roots. Finally, an increase in ethnic pride since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has solidified a sense of cultural identity, which means that AAE features may be used to signal solidarity and group membership.

### Suggested Reading

Purnell, Isardi, and Baugh. “Perceptual and Phonetic Experiments on American English Dialect Identification.”

Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*.

Thomas, “Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics of African American Vernacular English.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Consider how the social history of a dialect affects how we view the variety itself. In other words, how do associations we make with groups of speakers affect how we view their speech?
2. How do you define ethnicity? If you are Hungarian American, for example, is that different than being Asian American or African American? What are the boundaries and why?
3. How do you feel about the difference between promoting socially appropriate forms compared to the “deficit” view of nonstandard forms? Does the idea that vernacular English forms can be linguistically correct but socially unaccepted change the way you might view speakers of such dialects?
4. Do a bit more research into the different views on the origins of AAE. What types of evidence support these views? Are you swayed in either direction?

# Socializing Children into Language

## Lecture 21

Anyone who has ever spent time with children knows that talking is not typically a difficult skill for them. Even without a great deal of early child-directed speech exposure, children still acquire language at the same rate as those who receive more verbal attention. In this lecture, we will learn the truth about what parents are and aren't responsible for in terms of children's language acquisition. How is it that we all learn language, and how does socially meaningful variation get passed along across generations?

### Child-Directed Speech

- The term *child-directed speech* (or *motherese*) refers to the repetitive, intonationally variable, higher-pitched speech that adults typically use when talking to babies or very young children. There is not much empirical evidence that motherese has an effect on children's language skills in the long term; it may result in some short-term benefits, but these tend to disappear fairly rapidly.
- Despite the lack of evidence that child-directed speech has a significant effect, it's important to note that children with no verbal exposure don't learn language at all. We find this, for instance, with so-called "wild" children, who are prevented from having verbal interaction. Even with intensive language instruction later, such children are never able to achieve mastery of the language system.
- On the one hand, child-directed speech doesn't seem to have a long-term effect on language acquisition. But on the other hand, exposure to verbal interaction seems to make a significant difference. What does this apparent contradiction suggest about the process of language acquisition?
  - Verbal interaction in early life is a crucial component of children's ability to acquire language, but the specification of this input is fairly flexible. In other words, we don't need to

model all possible sentences and patterns for our children in order for them to acquire the ability to produce sentences.

- We also don't need to direct inordinate amounts of speech at children or adjust the mode in which we deliver it. Just turning on the language switch by providing language input, along with contextual cues—eye gazing and pointing—generally seems to do the trick.
- When a parent points to a dog and says “dog,” the child seems to assume that *dog* is the name of the entire entity, not some specific aspect of it, such as its leg or its fur. This suggests that children already have some internal ideals about how to interpret language before they even hear it. In other words, children seem to come wired with predispositions that aid them in the process of language acquisition.
- Note, too, that parents don't generally explain linguistic rules to children, such as the rules for forming yes/no questions in English. Yet children still manage to figure out these rules and use them correctly.

### **Communication Modeling**

- Although they don't actively teach children linguistic rules, parents still play a critical part in their children's linguistic development.
  - First, children must witness live interaction between speakers on a regular basis. Without such engagement, there is ample evidence that children will not acquire the adult language system.
  - Further, learning to be a speaker of a language requires that we gain not only sounds and syntax but also the social conventions associated with communication. It is in this communicative and social aspect of language where parents' modeling comes into play.

- Extensive use of motherese itself doesn't seem to make a long-term impact on basic linguistic acquisition, but the amount and type of input children receive seem to affect their educational gains. A 1995 study by two developmental psychologists found that exposure to diverse vocabulary for 3-year-old children had a profound impact on their language proficiency even as far along as third grade.
- As with their ability to acquire word meaning and syntactic knowledge, children seem primed for the acquisition of communicative competence. Even babies seem to know how to communicate their needs at a rudimentary level, though this communication doesn't involve language. Through eye gazing, gestures, and vocalizations, babies are fairly good at letting us know what they want.
  - Pre-linguistic babies most likely make such moves without understanding their communicative content. But our reactivity and responses teach them that these behaviors have communicative functions, and this becomes an early part of their language socialization.
  - Thus, the parent's job is not to teach children linguistic rules but to show them how to use language appropriately in the social world.

### Competencies for Children

- Among the competencies children must develop as they age is an understanding of the form and meaning of speech acts. Interactions with adults and peers teach children how people use utterances to get things done.
- Adults also train children in the mechanics of constructing conversation, that is, how to initiate conversation, take turns, respond appropriately, and not talk over someone else.
- An extremely powerful and important conversational tool children must acquire is how to construct adjacency pairs, that is, how to elicit further speech from those with whom they interact.

- Children also learn from adults how to construct speech in different styles for different contexts. Although this social language learning typically begins with parental input, it is not confined to that relationship. In fact, this kind of learning continues to develop as children go to school and engage in peer-group conversation and activities.
- Parents also assist children by being willing and forgiving conversational partners. We expect that children do not know how to initiate conversation, develop topics, and follow conversational maxims. Similarly, children seem to be forgiving of conversational missteps or disfluencies when dealing with one another and seem to use language with one another that reflects age-appropriate behavior.



© Fuse/Thinkstock.

- Evaluation of other's turns and topics seems to be a key feature in the process of socialization. We don't just all contribute factual turns, but we also discuss and consider what others have said and what we think of it. Such evaluation, by displaying our orientation to what's been said, attempts to establish socially normative agreement on behavior and events.
  - This elaboration and evaluation of previous turns at talk, though, places a heavy demand on cognitive processing. One must produce a linguistically and socially appropriate utterance that works with the conversational framework and tone of participants; thus, it takes longer to gain such competence from a developmental standpoint.

**Babies are engaged with adults socially and eager to interact; this is the ground floor for communicative competence.**

- Young children are still just learning how to control conversation construction itself—how to understand and respond to an adjacency pair part, for example. Once they have this skill, they can move on to learning more nuanced social skills, such as offering evaluations and taking on the perspectives of others during turns at talk, qualities found more often in adult speech.
- Adult speech also models more than the mechanics of conversation. It seems to illustrate the way speakers can switch between registers and roles. This, in turn, serves as a scaffold for children to learn linguistically meaningful variation.
  - To be competent social actors, children learn how to construct conversation in culturally appropriate ways and to take on socially relevant roles. For example, a 2001 study of 4-year-old children interacting with 2-year-old children showed that the 4-year-olds used simplified speech, similar to that used by adults interacting with young children.
  - When talking to adults, the 4-year-olds used more “adult”-type structures than they showed with their younger peers. This study suggests that even young children are able to recognize and use socially appropriate forms.

### Learning Variation

- Children also seem to acquire socially meaningful variation at a subtle level. Research suggests, for instance, that such features as *in/ing* variation, t-glottalization, and /ay/ monophthongization appear in early childhood and are most likely first modeled by mothers. A number of studies have shown similar variation patterns in young children’s speech to those found in older speakers.
- Linguist William Labov has hypothesized that such learning typically starts with children’s mothers because they are usually the primary caregivers. Because mothers play a key role in the dissemination of change to their young, Labov suggests that they



may be more sensitive to linguistic norms. This norming can come in the form of reiterating standard forms or in using new norms.

- Though not well researched, this learning of variation may be keenly affected by the use of child-directed speech. Although motherese may not help children acquire the language system, it may be that the exaggerated patterns include more exaggerated modeling of norms, making children more aware of contrast with variable forms they hear in their environment.

### **Gendered Speech**

- Research has shown that mothers and fathers not only model socially meaningful variants to their kids, but they also pass along gender bias in their use. This early gendering of speech seems to be fairly prevalent.
- As we discussed in an earlier lecture, women are often believed to use more standard speech and to recognize the social currency of language more than men. In contrast, men are more often associated with local, informal language. It seems as if this process of orienting women to standard forms and men to local forms begins at a young age.
- We also saw in an earlier lecture that women seem to be the leaders in most incoming linguistic changes. The prevalence of mothers as linguistic role models may also favor the spread of such female-led change because women have more influence on early childhood speech. Support for such a hypothesis comes from research showing that female-led sound changes are learned more easily and evidenced more often in children than male-led changes.

### **Linguistic Change in Adolescence and Adulthood**

- Young children seem to model much of their linguistic behavior on that of their parents, but as we know, this is not the case once they reach adolescence. Why do adolescents depart so radically from their parents' models?

- Research on adolescent speech suggests that older children are the most active in the process of language variation. It is not until we reach adulthood that we seem to settle down linguistically.
  - In apparent time studies, we typically see a pattern where new norms are measurable primarily in young speakers' systems, while older speakers show much greater use of the previous forms. Although their children advance changes, adults typically don't. Thus, these studies seem to support the idea that our speech essentially reflects the patterns we learned in childhood.
  - Despite the fact that adult speech appears to be more stable than child and adolescent speech, there is some evidence that adults are able to alter at least some aspects of their speech toward incoming community norms. This research also suggests, however, that change later in life is much more restricted in degree and type than that commonly found in youngsters. It would appear that language change is really the domain of the young or the young at heart.

### Suggested Reading

Coulmas, "Communicating across Generations."

Foulkes, Docherty, and Watt. "Phonological Variation in Child-Directed Speech."

Gampe, Liebal, and Tomasello, "Eighteen-Month-Olds Learn Novel Words through Overhearing."

## Questions to Consider

1. The sentence *I want John to visit* can be an answer to which of the following questions? What blocks its interpretation in the other question context?
  - Who do you want to visit?
  - Who do you wanna visit?
2. How would you explain that linguistic concept to a child? How can you explain the fact that children seem to acquire this knowledge without explicit help?
3. Thinking of your experience with young children, do you use child-directed speech? What characterizes its use? Why do you think you do or don't use it?
4. Are there any aspects of your own speech (beyond vocabulary) that you think have changed over time as an adult? If so, how systematic are they, and what prompted your adoption of them (for example, moving to a new area or being around younger speakers)?

# Language, Adolescence, and Education

## Lecture 22

**A**dolescence is a messy part of life, bringing with it insecurity and rebellion. But as we will see in this lecture, it is during this period in life that we are probably most active in being linguistically innovative. In fact, researchers increasingly find that adolescent culture is a crucial mechanism through which linguistic change advances in society as a whole. It's also clear that language changes across generations; in this lecture, we'll look at why this is so and how it happens.

### Language Change across Generations

- When talking about language change across generations, linguists are not typically referring only to slang use. They are actually more interested in how more subtle phonological or syntactic changes make inroads in our speech.
- Many studies of linguistic change find that the use of incoming forms peaks around age 17. This peak seems to be a key part in what is referred to as *incrementation*, or the process by which linguistic change advances within a community. When we look at the new linguistic forms and variations adopted by adolescents today, we're getting a preview of the forms that will become normal in the future.
  - Among the linguistic changes that seem to be on the horizon are vowel shift processes, such as the low back vowel merger or raised low front vowels, that are evidenced in all of us. In fact, few young speakers' vowel systems are the same as they were a couple of generations ago, suggesting that many of these vowel changes have become new norms.
  - Beyond phonology, we find a number of other features prevalent in young speakers' systems. For example, all of us have heard the advancement of *like* as a quotative, meaning

that it's used instead of the verb *to say* ("I was like 'no way!'"). It is also on the increase as a discourse marker ("Like, have you been living in a cave?").

### **Vernacular Reorganization**

- As we discussed in the last lecture, young children's systems are first influenced by their primary caregivers. In other words, if your parents speak English, you will speak English, too. However, children who grow up in the United States but whose parents speak English as a second language typically don't speak with their parents' accent. And children of nonaccented English-speaking parents don't speak identically to their parents either.
  - The reason for this is that early on, children are affected by *vernacular reorganization*—a shift away from the norms acquired from their caregivers to new norms, most likely those found among peer groups.
  - Vernacular reorganization seems to begin somewhere between 4 to 8 years old and is intensified as children age. In fact, age seems to be a critical component in the process of change, with local dialect features acquired quite young.
- After this early stage of dialect acquisition—past age 6 or so—children seem to reorient strongly toward other children and away from their parents' model. At this point, features that are sociolinguistically meaningful in peer groups become a powerful influence on speech.
- The pressure to converge speech toward peer-based norms appears to be most intense in adolescence, peaking around age 14. This peer scrutiny is coupled with the strong urge for an independent social identity. At the same time, adolescent social networks are much larger than young children's, increasing the variant pool to which they are exposed. These factors encourage the continued movement of speech in the direction of the norms of the adolescent peer group.

## Gender Differences in Language Change

- The adoption of incoming norms is not just a feature of the young but a feature of girls' speech in particular. Reflecting the pattern of female-led sound change among adults, adolescent girls tend to be in advance of adolescent boys in the vast majority of linguistic changes.
  - Although both boys and girls inherit the system most likely from a mother, it seems that girls are most active in the incrementation process itself. Boys show incrementation at the level of the mother, but they don't show as much progress after the initial maternal input.
  - In other words, most research suggests that girls advance the adoption of incoming norms during childhood, which they then pass along to their children, while boys typically don't seem to advance too far past the level of their mothers.
  - Because mothers tend to have more advanced systems, this inheritance moves the boys' linguistic systems forward relative to previous generations. However, owing to their less active adoption of emerging changes, boys fall behind the ever-advancing female system. As any given change is more fully transitioned toward the new norm, this gender gap seems to disappear, and boys tend to adopt the change more fully.
- Explanations for this gender asymmetry have often focused on girls' greater awareness of the social capital of language because girls are socialized more toward their appearance, of which language is a part. Alternative accounts suggest that boys resist incoming forms early in the process of change because such forms have a greater association with girls.
- Shifts toward nonstandard or localized forms, in contrast, are more likely to be led by boys, perhaps because these forms are more associated with fathers than mothers. As discussed in the previous

lecture, mothers are more likely than fathers to use standard forms when directing speech toward young children. This may set up an early gender bias in the recognition of norms and gender.

### **Language in Education**

- A great deal of linguistic and social identity formation for children and adolescents occurs at school. How does language operate in the context of the educational system, both as an instrument for accessing knowledge and in developing sociolinguistic practices?
- In almost any educational system, language is a fundamental part of the learning process. In this context, language is overtly referenced and understood as a valued resource. You learn rules for how to write it and how to use it. You learn to recognize and operate within standard language practices and professional styles.
- In addition to this meta-awareness, language is also the way adolescents communicate their ideas during the school day. Adolescents use language to identify themselves as particular role players within the educational system. Without language as both a product and a means, education would look very different.
- For many sociolinguists, the explicit focus on teaching standard norms makes school an obvious site for research because students enter school with different language and dialect backgrounds. However, the intense identity formation that occurs in adolescence and the centrality of language in that process also make school a crucial site in the dissemination of linguistic change. For this reason, educational institutions play a large part in both the perception and the production of linguistic variables.
- Adolescent speech often is assumed to be like adult speech, with gender, status, and ethnicity playing large roles in shaping how speech is realized. However, this assumption ignores the fact that schools are not exact microcosms of the external social world.

- Schools reflect many of the same social pressures as the external world, but adolescents are not working professionals. Rather, they are impressionable young minds trying to make friends and be “cool”; thus, it makes sense that different relationships among groups and different types of identity structures might be in play.
- School is where we begin to develop our sense of self by identifying various social landmarks. We also begin to understand how our social backgrounds limit and direct us into certain social and educational paths.
- The idea that socialization of language and other behavior begins early is not new. In fact, in the 1970s, a British sociologist named Basil Bernstein had quite an influence on education when he proposed that children from different social class backgrounds had profound differences in the way their home dialects affected their potential to learn in the school system.
  - Bernstein’s argument essentially claimed that the type of language used by children within their most local social groups shaped the cultural relationships, assumptions, and forms of interaction they brought to school.
  - Although Bernstein didn’t examine the role of peer groups in schools, his work was some of the first to recognize that schools play a role in developing and maintaining children’s ideological systems.

### **The Peer-Group Social World**

- Another key aspect of how schools shape language and society is by bringing together a peer-group social world. Linguist Penelope Eckert spent a year exploring this socializing aspect of school in a Detroit-area high school. In her book *Jocks and Burnouts*, Eckert examines how the social practices in high school affect the degree to which students pick up new linguistic variants.



- She found that the social categories relevant in high school were much different than those relevant in early childhood or in adulthood.

- Her work suggested, as we've seen, that young children's vowel systems are most similar to those of their parents. She also found that children replicated the class-based distinctions found in adult speech.

- Yet adolescents speak more like their peer groups than their parents, using innovative variants that originate outside their parents' systems. Thus, class distinctions are no longer the main social force affecting adolescents' speech. Instead, peer-group reference is a greater influence, and much of this influence is brokered at school. Further, language is a key part of the social symbolic system that adolescents use to show their orientations and affiliations.

- Thus, Eckert suggests that we can learn a great deal about how language change begins and is transmitted by looking at the social categories that emerge in schools.

- During the junior high and high school years, a separate linguistic market emerges. This distinctive market is driven by a need for separation from the nuclear family and is subject to strong peer-



**Adolescent social groups, which value “coolness” over wealth, are not defined by the same set of social criteria enacted in the adult world.**

group norming. Within this market, fashion, music, and slang become key markers of adolescent style.

- In her research, Eckert found key relationships between orientation to social categories in high school and use of linguistic variables. In other words, parents' socioeconomic class was not a major factor in these adolescents' use of incoming linguistic features. Instead, adolescent group affiliation turned out to be a more powerful predictor. Not surprisingly, Eckert also found differences in the use of certain variables by girls and boys, but these differences were also tied to group membership.
- As adolescents seek to distinguish themselves from their parents and from other adolescent groups, innovation and change become a strong mechanism to accomplish self-actualization. If a new feature becomes symbolic of a social identity or practice that is attractive beyond its originating speakers and groups, it spreads quickly. Of course, not all changes become widespread; many remain markers of group membership or die. But those that do survive become the speech of adulthood.

### Suggested Reading

Bucholtz, "Geek the Girl."

Eckert, "Adolescent Social Structure and the Spread of Linguistic Change."

———, "Language and Adolescent Peer Groups."

### Questions to Consider

1. Before we participate as producers or workers in the larger economic structure, what are the important influences on our lives?
2. Think about the structure and organization of most American schools. How might schools be seen to broker middle-class values and goals?

3. Think back to your high school or junior high school days. What were the identity symbols beyond language (for example, clothes, music, hair) to indicate membership in adolescent subcultures, such as the jocks and the burn-outs?

# Textspeak—2 Bad 4 English?

## Lecture 23

Over the last 20 years, the use of technology and social media has brought dramatic changes to many aspects of our lives. It is not surprising that these changes have resulted in adjustments to how language is used or that they have created a wave of negative characterizations. But do computer-mediated forms of communication affect our old forms of writing and spelling? Is it true that texting language represents the decay of English? In this lecture, we will look past the headlines that predict the downfall of the written word and examine the empirical evidence.

### Texting Language

- Most of us are now familiar with *texting language*—the form of written language used in a number of computer-mediated communication (CMC) forums, such as instant messaging (IM), Facebook chat, and text messaging. Because such communication unfolds somewhat in real time, the written form of language used in these contexts has been altered to fit a more informal, “conversational” style.
- Texting language involves the use of more phonetic representations or abbreviated spellings, such as *u* for *you* or *r* for *are*. It also includes the use of acronyms for common phrases, such as *BTW* for *by the way*. Further, function words, such as articles and subjects, are often omitted; *Do you want to go to a movie?* might become *Wanna go to movie?*
- Because the keypad often used for texting requires more keystrokes than traditional keyboards, it is also not unusual to find messages lacking in capitalization and punctuation. In addition, texting is used in many situations where brevity is required, such as during a class or meeting. For this reason, shorter exchanges and shortcuts are preferred.

- Finally, emoticons that display speaker attitude or stance are an often-cited feature of CMC. In fact, with smartphones, you can now insert icons to display a variety of emotional states.

### **Instant Messaging versus Traditional Communication**

- How different are textspeak and other computer-based forms of communication from traditional forms of written communication? Recent work by Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis suggests that IM represents a hybrid register, meaning that it calls on resources we typically use in both spoken and written formats.
  - IM has the qualities of written communication in that it is a text-based activity with no face-to-face contact, but it also differs from written communication substantially. For example, it uses more casual speech styles and certain conventions often found in face-to-face interactions.
  - Further, texting and CMC also involve the use of emoticons and exaggerated spellings that are not found in either spoken or traditional written discourse. This suggests that texting has some aspects of a novel form of communication with its own conventions and uses.
- Although it might be novel in its end form, the resources we draw on to text come from nothing more mysterious than writing and talking—a fact that probably requires us to be a bit more reserved in our criticism. We should view textspeak as a new development supplementing more traditional forms of communication.
- Many of the spelling alterations that appear to bother us in textspeak are limited to high-frequency, common words, such as *you*, *are*, and *thanks*. Shortened spellings for these words arose both from the need for brevity because of character limitations and from the difficulties of typing on a tiny keyboard. Surprisingly, though, the use of spelling shortcuts and emoticons is actually quite limited.
  - The frequently abbreviated word types, in fact, are so ubiquitous, widespread, and simple that it is improbable that such words are dying out. What annoys people is the fact that

spelling is altered—not any real likelihood that texting will affect spelling abilities.

- This probably relates to our fear that young people will fail to recognize the social appropriateness of formal versus informal styles of use. However, a shift in recognition of speech style and appropriate context is not a texting issue but more of a societal shift in norms about formality. In other words, our discussion about why texting is destructive to society probably has more to do with its constant intrusion into our social lives and our movement away from established behavioral norms more generally.
- In reality, much of what we think about texting is based on a relatively limited use of specific textspeak conventions.
  - A number of studies have looked at the use of various aspects associated with CMC, such as capitalization, punctuation, spelling reductions, emoticons, sentence length, and so on. Most of these studies have found that the vast majority of text messages, IMs, and the like do not contain these features.
  - For example, Tagliamonte and Denis found that found that abbreviations, such as *LOL* ('laughing out loud') and *TTYL* ('talk to you soon'), accounted for only 2.4 percent of the text messages they studied. These findings echo those of other researchers. Thus, the frequency of these features seems to be vastly overestimated.

### The Sociocultural Context of Textspeak

- Beyond looking at the specific linguistic features associated with texting, we should also consider the sociocultural context in which it emerges. Given that it is a prominent feature of youth culture, what role does it serve in terms of social practice in that age group and beyond?
- Most work examining the role of texting suggests that this form of communication enhances solidarity and helps maintain

relationships. Often, texting is used where phone conversations might not be, for example, to ask a quick question or to let someone know that you are running late. Many of us would skip these routine exchanges if they required the effort of a phone call.

- A key aspect of textspeak is that it is considered a routine part of daily life, not the provenance of a special user group. In fact, there is little empirical evidence to support the use of textspeak as a shorthand code.
  - It is true that younger people text to a greater degree than older people and that they use it more for solidarity and social networking than older people do, but it is not developing into its own linguistic code.
  - In other words, texting is not used by teenagers to exclude adults or as an in-group identifier.
- Texting is more a medium among social intimates than an exclusionary medium or an encroachment on more traditional workplace forms. One 2003 study investigating the content of texts found that their main function is relational rather than informational, with about two-thirds of the texts examined serving such a role. These findings have been confirmed by most subsequent research. This socially driven function gives rise to the spelling shortcuts and abbreviations that inspire criticism.
- Beyond its relational function, texting also serves a practical, time-efficient function as a way to coordinate plans and negotiate everyday matters. Most research, for example, indicates that making social arrangements is one of the primary purposes for texting.

### **Politeness and Face Needs in Texting**

- The use of emoticons and other features that “show” our emotional states seems to suggest that we are aware of politeness and face needs when texting. For example, research shows that text messages often make use of humor or include phrases to indicate surprise, concern, or other emotions.

- Though often ridiculed, emoticons seem to serve several relational purposes in texts. They can simply represent a facial expression (☺) as an indicator of emotional state, but they are also frequently used to suggest the illocutionary force behind a text—how the sender wants the text to be taken. For example, when making a request via text, a sender might add an emoticon to soften or mitigate the force of the request. The use of humor and laughter markers (*HA! HA!*) also seems to meet face needs for texters.
- Texting affords other face-saving advantages, as well. For example, the ability to take a bit more time in responding to a text than one would have in face-to-face interactions or on a phone call gives people a chance to consider their responses before sending them. People can also choose to avoid texts by simply not responding.



© AntonioGualtem/Stock/Thinkstock.

**Teen texting seems to fulfill a relational role, focusing on friendship maintenance, but young adult texting is more practically oriented, used to set up meetings or ask questions.**

### Texting and Literacy

- Despite many news reports and parents expressing worry that texting and other Internet-based forms of communication are blurring the lines between formal and informal contexts of writing, this concern does not seem to be well supported. The purpose of texting and other forms of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, is rarely confused with the purpose of writing papers for school or documents for work.
- The few studies attempting to measure the relationship between proficiency in textspeak and proficiency in literacy have not



found any link. Overall, research suggests that proficiency in the acquisition of standard forms is not affected by the use of texting and social media technologies.

- In fact, a 2009 study by Michelle Drouin and Claire Davis found that college students clearly recognized the difference in appropriateness of using textspeak with peers compared to more formal contexts, such as in e-mails with professors. The distinction was apparent both in students' own reports and in analysis of their correspondence.
- This research also explored the relationship between standardized literacy measures and texting use. Again, no significant differences were found between those students who identified themselves as texters and those who identified as nontexters.

### **Texting versus Face-to-Face Interaction**

- Beyond the concerns about the decline of standard language use and the effects on young people's literacy, a different sort of argument about texting and social media formats is that they affect our face-to-face conversations and interactions. Some fear that CMC will steer individuals away from conversations and activities with physically present interlocutors.
- However, one technological advance we rarely consider these days is the telephone, which was, in some ways, a precursor to texting in that it allowed intimacy at a distance. It was also a strikingly new technology that inspired concerns, such as being interrupted in one's home and private spaces by an external intrusion.
  - Of course, few of us now live without telephone capabilities, and rarely do we hear complaints about the telephone making young people less able to communicate in other forums or about it having replaced letter writing as a main means of communication.
  - The fact that we seem to have survived the phone as a new technology suggests that we will also adapt fairly well to texting.

## Suggested Reading

Drouin and Davis, “R U Txtting?”

Tagliamonte and Denis, “Linguistic Ruin?” <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/daol/articles/v1/n1/a3/thurlow2002003-t.html>.

Thurlow, “Generation Txt?”

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you text or use other forms of CMC? If so, what do you see as the main communicative function it serves for you? If you don’t use these forms, why not?
2. If you text, are your texts mainly relational or informational? Do you use emoticons? If so, do you use them to indicate your emotional state or to orient your receiver about how to take your message?
3. Consider how you feel about the relationship between texting and its effect on how we engage socially. What positive and negative aspects do you find?
4. How do you feel about the effect of texting on literacy and writing? Can you envision how greater use of a written form among young people might actually enhance the study of writing as a craft? For example, how might texting help students understand how authors work with tone and perspective?

# The Changing Face of Linguistic Diversity

## Lecture 24

People are often interested in two questions related to the subject of linguistics: (1) Are English dialects becoming more similar over time, and (2) What effect does mass media have on language? It seems obvious that the massive exporting of English and American pop culture must be shaping the way people communicate in some fashion, but surprisingly, these questions are understudied by theoretical linguists. In this lecture, we will take a look at the opposing forces of convergence and divergence in language, both at home and abroad. We'll examine both the power and the limitations of linguistic imperialism. And we'll find out if the global reach of popular media is, in fact, shaping the way English is spoken worldwide.

### The Question of Convergence

- Convergence can be as simple as borrowing vocabulary words or as complex as acquiring new grammatical rules. It is much more likely in the former case than the latter. For example, we have easily picked up the words *sake* and *sushi*, but we don't generally adopt Japanese grammatical word order.
- We can also discuss convergence in terms of decreasing numbers of languages in the world overall or in terms of linguistic leveling across regionally distinctive forms within a single language.
- Adding to this complexity, language is driven toward divergence in response to social pressures, such as gender, race, and class. Cultural and social motivations often drive us to speak differently, either because of geographic or social separation or a desire to set ourselves apart.
- Why might we want to converge or diverge linguistically? In your own experience, do you pick up on certain styles of speaking when the person you're talking to is someone with whom you identify strongly? Do you sometimes move to a formal, impersonal style

because you want to distance yourself from someone? These questions point to the power of identity construction, which is crucial to the issue of convergence.

### Identity Construction

- In an earlier lecture, we discussed a number of social factors, such as migration, geography, ecology, and group reference, that help to form and maintain dialects. Quite frequently, as we've seen, language changes occur in ways that make speakers more distinct from others. This leads to the recognition of specific dialects and, in some cases, the birth of new languages. In fact, this is how English came into existence in the first place.
- Language divergence happens when speakers move away from each other for economic, sociopolitical, or psychological reasons. Often, this occurs simultaneously with a population shift, as in situations involving colonization, migration, or war. Insofar as these same pressures affect us today and into the future, it is unlikely that the process of linguistic divergence will disappear altogether.
- However, languages or language varieties also become more similar over time. For example, the early settlement of the United States led to increasing divergence from dialects in England. As the settlers in the New World established social and cultural ties, a new *koine* was formed—a new variety of language resulting from the mixture of various language inputs. As a result of this New World koine, the children of the early settlers began to speak more like one another and less like those who stayed behind in the original homeland.
- Likewise, the emergence of a standard language in the face of many regionalized or local varieties often has a homogenizing effect to some degree on the local varieties themselves. Thus, in our own history, colonists began to see their land not as isolated settlements but as a united band of colonies in opposition to the British government. This recognition of greater similarity across groups brought greater linguistic convergence. In other words,

regionalisms, though still present, became part of a larger, more recognizable “American” dialect—bringing with it symbolic unity.

- Sometimes this linguistic standardization occurs not just at the national level but also at the international level. The expansion of a nation economically, politically, or militarily can establish that language as an international linguistic model. In modern times, this process of standardization has certainly intensified with our increased global connectedness and reliance on CMC.

### **The Global Expansion of English**

- Over the last century, English has spread rapidly around the globe in its role as a language of diplomacy, economy, and entertainment. For those speaking a less economically or socially advantageous language, there is something to be gained by teaching their children English or adopting English as a second language themselves. With such widespread adoption of English, we certainly seem to be converging toward a smaller set of dominant languages.
- At the same time, this expansion gives birth to new and diverging dialects of English. Many world Englishes have now moved beyond being just second languages. They have become thriving separate dialects, in some cases, with a native speaker base of their own. This is true in Singapore, West Africa, Hong Kong, and the Philippines.
- The key to the development of world English has been contact—situations in which two or more groups of speakers are forced to interact and communicate with each other. This contact alone establishes a new form of language, particularly when members of one group must acquire a language to meet a dominant group’s needs.
- In the case of English, indigenous language speakers adopted the variety brought to their land by British colonizers, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, these varieties developed uniquely to represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of those speaking it.

- Though it may seem that the colonizer simply instills a dominant linguistic code, it is rare that the experience of the linguistic groups involved is that rigid and fixed. Instead, though the language may be imposed by a politically and economically dominant group, it is altered and shaped by the experiences of the indigenous population. Of course, it is here that English takes on the role of the “killer” language—when it begins to encroach on the domains of the indigenous language that preceded it.
- Although such spread of English is often taken as evidence of increasing linguistic homogenization, that is far from true.
  - Over time, the English of another land comes to represent the social and cultural aspects of those speakers in the same way that Southern speech in the United States has come to represent a different history and way of life in the South. It is from this perspective that we seem to fear English’s globalization—not because of a fear of homogenization, but because English becomes something else to someone else.
  - The dark side of this convergence is that it typically results in the death of some languages, particularly those that don’t have a large number of speakers.
- Even granting the serious nature of this phenomenon, we should remember the forces of linguistic divergence. As English becomes more widespread, speakers become proficient at creating global varieties that come to represent group identity.

### **The Effects of Mass Media**

- If we think of linguistic movement toward similar vocabulary, or *lexis*, as being a meaningful type of convergence, then we can certainly say that movies, television, and online media are promoting convergence around English forms. For the most part, though, linguistic change beyond new vocabulary requires true social engagement and interaction.



- We also find that changes in U.S. migratory patterns have affected what were once salient ecological differences among American dialects. For example, over the last century, rural dialects have atrophied. Migration to cities has created both dialect contact and a motivation for speakers of rural dialects to shift toward more standard forms. Research suggests that similar dialect leveling is occurring in Great Britain.
- To some degree, changes in modern speech can be traced to exposure to pop culture and the media. The most obvious examples here include the spread of vocabulary items or phrases. What else does our mass media export?
  - In general, research has found little support for the idea that grammatical and phonological patterns are diffused via media. Picking up an isolated pronunciation of a word is not unusual, but deeper levels of linguistic influence require peer group interaction and local rewards for using new forms.
  - There is limited evidence, however, that popular media might be able to spread some phonological alternations. This is true only if the media norm plays into a linguistic and social ideology that already exists in the target community. In other words, some research suggests that exposure to norms already familiar and accessible at some level within a community can be assisted by modeling in pop culture.

### Linguistic Unity?

- As we've discussed, there is a consistent trend toward linguistic leveling across a number of regional dialects. However, there is also ample evidence of divergence.
  - Earlier, for example, we saw a number of vowel changes affecting the regional dialects of American English. This is in contrast to what we might expect given accessibility and contact patterns.
  - In addition, vowel patterns in Englishes worldwide, such as New Zealand English and varieties of Southern British English,



are also showing divergent vowel systems. Such tendencies suggest that at the level of phonology, there is not a great deal of convergence overall.

- We also have found no evidence that access to mass media has introduced much beyond vocabulary worldwide. In other words, social interaction remains the primary means through which language changes. Limited social engagement, such as that typically found among speakers of different global English varieties, limits the degree to which language converges toward shared norms.
- Most importantly, though, the belief that we are headed toward linguistic convergence doesn't take into account the fact that linguistic diversity serves an important role. Dialects are about communicating identity as much as about communicating facts.
- Throughout this course, we have seen how much our language differs depending on who is using it and who we are talking to. Clearly, these influences will not lessen or fade away soon. Language, as long as it is part and parcel of social identity, will remain a flexible and evolving tool to reflect our differences, as well as our similarities.

### Suggested Reading

Chambers, "TV Makes People Sound the Same."

Stuart-Smith, Pryce, Timmins, and Gunter, "Television Can Also Be a Factor in Language Change."

Trudgill, *Sociolinguistic Variation and Change*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Before listening to this lecture, what did you think about issues of convergence and divergence in English today? What evidence empirically supported these hypotheses?

2. Are you surprised at the limited influence found for mass media? Why or why not? Why is vocabulary considered by linguists a superficial level of influence?
3. Consider your own speech. What do you see as your own linguistic style? Are there features used by others you know that construct a recognizable social identity?

## Bibliography

---

Aitchison, Jean. *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001. This book looks at how and why languages change, considering questions of linguistic decay and linguistic progress.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962. This early work introduces and develops the idea of speech act theory.

Basso, Keith. “‘To Give Up on Words’: Silence in Western Apache Culture.” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (1970): 213–230. Examines the use of silence in the Apache language as an important communicative act often misunderstood by Anglo culture.

Bloomer, Aileen, Patrick Griffiths, and Andrew Merrison. “Conversation Analysis.” In *Introducing Language in Use: A Coursebook*. New York: Routledge, 2005. A good introductory chapter to the basics of transcription and analytic methods in conversation analysis.

———. “Pragmatics.” In *Introducing Language in Use: A Coursebook*. New York: Routledge, 2005. A good introduction to the main concepts in pragmatics.

Boroditsky, Lera. “How Language Shapes Thought.” *Scientific American* (February 2011): 63–65. An accessible popular press article on the relationship between language and thought, including contemporary studies testing this link.

Boroditsky, Lera, Lauren Schmidt, and Webb Phillips. “Sex, Syntax, and Semantics.” In *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*, edited by Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow, pp. 61–79. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. An interesting paper that looks at how

grammatical structure—in particular, grammatical gender—can influence meaning.

Bromhard, Allan. “Do All Languages Come from the Same Source?” In *The Five-Minute Linguist: Bite-Sized Essays on Language and Languages*, edited by E. M. Rickerson and Barry Hilton. London: Equinox, 2012. Explores the idea of language families and how linguists reconstruct linguistic family trees.

Brown, Penelope, and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987. The influential book that develops the basic ideas behind politeness theory and the concepts of positive and negative face.

Bucholtz, Mary. “Geek the Girl: Language, Femininity and Female Nerds.” In *Gender and Belief Systems*, edited by Natasha Warner et al., pp. 119–131. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group, 1996. A look at how “geek” girls use linguistic features in ways that help construct this identity.

Campbell-Kibler, Kathryn. “Accent, (ING), and the Social Logic of Listener Perceptions.” *American Speech* 82, no. 1 (2007): 32–64. This article looks at how we perceive variation in subtle linguistic features, such as *in/ing*, as cues signaling social meaning.

Chambers, J. K. “TV Makes People Sound the Same.” In *Language Myths*, edited by Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill, pp. 123–131. London: Penguin, 1998. An accessible article debating the widespread belief about the role of television in leading to convergent tendencies in language.

Childs, G. Tucker. “What’s the Difference between Dialects and Languages?” In *The Five-Minute Linguist: Bite-Sized Essays on Language and Languages*, edited by E. M. Rickerson and Barry Hilton. London: Equinox, 2012. A quick look at the sometimes not-so-clear division between a dialect and a language.

Coulmas, Florian. “Communicating across Generations: Age as a Factor of Linguistic Choice.” In *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speaker’s Choices*.

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. An introductory-level chapter on how language is altered at various stages across the lifespan.

Crystal, David. *A Little Book of Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. An overview of many aspects of language discussed in this course, including why languages change over time.

Dresner, Eli, and Susan C. Herring. "Functions of the Non-Verbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary Force." *Communication Theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 249–268. A study of how we use emoticons to convey much more than simply our emotional states.

Drouin, Michelle, and C. Davis. "R U Txtting? Is the Use of Text Speak Hurting Your Literacy?" *Journal of Literacy Research* 41, no. 1 (2009): 46–67. A study that looks at the relationship between literacy and texting.

Eckert, Penelope. "Adolescent Social Structure and the Spread of Linguistic Change." *Language in Society* 17, no. 2 (1988): 183–207. A paper summarizing some of the findings of Eckert's well-known work examining vowel shifts in Detroit high schools.

———. "Language and Adolescent Peer Groups." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2003): 112–118. A short article discussing the formation of adolescent peer groups and categories.

*Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. <http://www.ethnologue.com/>. A good site to learn about world languages (large and small).

Fasold, Ralph. "Language Attitudes." In *The Sociolinguistics of Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984. This textbook chapter presents a good overview of language attitude research.

Finegan, Edward. "Languages and Linguistics." In *Language: Its Structure and Use*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. An introductory textbook chapter discussing the importance of language as both a mental and a social system.

Foulkes, Paul, Gerard Docherty, and Dominic Watt. "Phonological Variation in Child-Directed Speech." *Language* 81, no. 1 (2005): 177–206. A bit technical but fascinating article examining how child-directed speech varies from inter-adult speech and how children's gender influences the type of speech input they receive.

Fridland, Valerie. "Rebel Vowels: Southern Vowel Shift and the N/S Speech Divide." *Language and Linguistic Compass* 6, no. 3 (2012): 183–192. Discusses the main aspects of vowel shifts in the South and provides an overview of recent findings on the Southern Vowel Shift.

———. "'Tie, Tied, and Tight': The Expansion of /ai/ Monophthongization in African-American and European-American Speech in Memphis, Tennessee." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 3 (2003): 279–298. A look at the contemporary development of /ay/ monophthongization in an urban Southern city.

Gampe, Anja, Kristin Liebal, and Michael Tomasello. "Eighteen-Month-Olds Learn Novel Words through Overhearing." *First Language* 32, no. 3 (2012): 385–397. This article tests the extent to which young children's new word learning is related to receiving child-directed speech or overhearing adult-to-adult speech.

Garfinkel, Harold. "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities." *Social Problems* 11, no. 3 (1964): 225–250. A short and entertaining paper that discusses the fact that we often are unaware of the assumptions that guide our everyday interactions.

Goffman, Erving. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981. An influential collection of essays providing a sociolinguistic analysis of talk in different forms, ranging from conversations to lectures.

———. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959. This work is heralded as providing the foundation for the concept of face on which most current politeness work is based.

Goodwin, Charles, and John Heritage. “Conversation Analysis.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 283–307. A nice overview of the field of conversational analysis, exploring both its origins and its approach to research questions.

Grice, H. P. “Logic and Conversation.” In *Syntax and Semantics*, Volume 3: *Speech Acts*, edited by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, pp. 41–58. New York: Academic Press, 1975. This seminal paper builds the theory of conversational implicature and develops the maxims of conversation.

Haas, Mary R. “Men’s and Women’s Speech in Koasati.” *Language* 20, no. 3 (1944): 142–149. An early paper on gender differences in grammatical form in the Native American language Koasati.

Hazen, Kirk, Paige Butcher, and Ashley King. “Unvernacular Appalachia: An Empirical Perspective on West Virginia Dialect Variation.” *English Today* 26, no. 4 (2010): 13–22. A short article about the Appalachian influence on speech in West Virginia; overviews several of the Appalachian features mentioned in the lectures.

Heritage, John, and Steven Clayman. “Talking Social Institutions into Being.” In *Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities, and Institutions*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. This chapter explores the use of adjacency pairs—in particular, question/answer pairs—in normal conversation and institutional contexts.

Hill, Jane, and Bruce Mannheim. “Language and World View.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 381–406. An academic paper that explicates misconceptions about the work of Boas, Sapir, and Whorf; also surveys some work that continues the examination of the relationship among language, culture, and thought.

Hymes, Dell. “On Communicative Competence.” In *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, edited by J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes, pp. 269–293. London: Penguin, 1972. A seminal paper examining the idea of communicative competence, or how speakers make use of their linguistic competence in the real world.

Johnstone, Barbara. "Uses of Southern-Sounding Speech by Contemporary Texas Women." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3, no. 4 (1999): 505–522. This article explores how Texas women orient to and use typical Southern features in a variety of ways stylistically.

Kennedy, Robert, and James Grama. "Chain Shifting and Centralization in California Vowels: An Acoustic Analysis." *American Speech* 87, no. 1 (2012): 39–56. A look at where California vowels are headed and how they are affected by the chain-shifting process in Western speech.

Kerswill, Paul. "Children, Adolescents, and Language Change." *Language Variation and Change* 8, no. 2 (1996): 177–202. A somewhat technical but fascinating examination of the process of language change during different stages of children's development.

Kiesling, Scott. "Men's Identities and Sociolinguistic Variation: The Case of Fraternity Men." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2, no. 1 (1998): 69–99. This article takes a social constructivist approach to examining how men in a fraternity shift their use of the *ing* variable as a stance marker to draw on the association of physical strength in male working-class culture.

Labov, William. "The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change." *Language Variation and Change* 2, no. 2 (1990): 205–254. The seminal paper on the fundamental role played by gender and class in disseminating linguistic change.

———. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972. An early and seminal sociolinguistic account of language variation; introduces the traditional treatment of stylistic variation as "attention paid to speech."

———. "The Three Dialects of English." In *New Ways of Analyzing Variation*, edited by Penelope Eckert. New York: Academic Press, 1991. An overview article detailing early work on vowel changes in American regional dialects. Although contemporary California changes were not as well documented at the time, this article provides a good summary of changes in the North and South.



Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg. *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Sound Change*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006. A comprehensive overview of the characteristic vowel differences emerging in different regions, based on audio analysis of speakers from across North America.

———. *A National Map of the Regional Dialects of American English*. [http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html). Provides a good overview of the main changes associated with the regional vowel shifts.

Lambert, W. E., R. C. Hodgson, R. C. Gardner, and S. Fillenbaum. “Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Language.” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 60, no. 1 (1960): 44–51. A seminal study using the matched-guise technique to examine latent language attitudes toward French and English speakers in Canada.

Language Samples Project. *Varieties of English*. <http://ic-migration.webhost.uits.arizona.edu/icfiles/ic/lsp/site/>. Provides audio samples and descriptions of dialect features for a wide array of dialects within and outside of the United States.

Lewis, M. Paul. “How Many Languages Are There in the World?” In *The Five-Minute Linguist: Bite-Sized Essays on Language and Languages*, edited by E. M. Rickerson and Barry Hilton. London: Equinox, 2012. Discusses the slippery slope of determining what counts as a language.

Li, Han Z. “Cooperative and Intrusive Interruptions in Inter- and Intra-Cultural Dyadic Discourse.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2001): 259–284. This research paper examines intra- and inter-cultural differences in interruptions and doctor/patient interactions involving Anglo-Canadian and Chinese speakers.

Ling, Richard, and Naomi S. Baron. “Text Messaging and IM: Linguistic Comparison of American College Data.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2007): 291–298. A linguistically oriented look at college students’ use of texting and instant messaging.

*Linguistic Atlas Project*. <http://www.lap.uga.edu/>. This website combines the various linguistic atlas projects undertaken in the United States between 1930 and 1980. Provides information on each project, areas examined, and in some cases, available data.

McDonough, Laraine, Soonja Choi, and Jean Mandler. "Understanding Spatial Relations: Flexible Infants, Lexical Adults." *Cognitive Psychology* 46 (2003): 229–259. Though technical, this study provides an interesting test of the degree to which native language experience influences how containment relations are conceptualized and understood by adults.

Metcalf, Allan. *How We Talk: American Regional English Today*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. A short book that examines American regional dialects and provides many entertaining examples of phonological and lexical differences found across dialects.

Morand, David. "Language and Power: An Empirical Analysis of Linguistic Strategies Used in Superior/Subordinate Communication." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 21, no. 3 (2000): 235–248. Examines the use of greater politeness from subordinates in a workplace context.

Morgan, Marcyliena. "Speech Community." In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti, pp. 3–22. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. This chapter from an anthropological reader overviews the concept, controversy, and history of the speech community.

Nevalainen, Terttu. "Gender Differences in the Evolution of Standard English: Evidence from the Corpus of Early English Correspondence." *Journal of English Linguistics* 28, no. 1 (2000): 38–59. Unlike many of the studies that examine the social correlates of linguistic change in modern speech, this study examines written documents to look at linguistic change in an earlier English era.

Niedzielski, Nancy. "The Effect of Social Information on the Perception of Sociolinguistic Variables." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1999): 62–85. A study examining how altering the social information

provided about speakers, such as whether they are from the local area or a different area, affects the way listeners process speech.

O'Barr, William M., and Bowman K. Atkins. "'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Language'?" In *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, edited by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, pp. 93–110. New York: Praeger, 1980. A well-known paper that explores the idea that many of the features typically associated with “women’s language” are often found in asymmetrical power relationships that do not involve gender.

Ogiermann, Eva. “Politeness and In-Directness across Cultures: A Comparison of English, German, Polish, and Russian Requests.” *Journal of Politeness Research* 5, no. 2 (2009): 189–216. Presents research on the politeness strategies used to make requests in several languages and examines the findings relative to cultural norms.

O'Grady, William, John Archibald, Mark Aronoff, and Janie Rees-Miller. *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. An introductory textbook that explains the main areas of linguistic study explored throughout this course, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Pinker, Stephen. *The Language Instinct*. New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994. A witty general discussion about language and the central areas of linguistic study.

Preston, Dennis. “Where the Worst English Is Spoken.” In *Focus on the USA*, edited by Edgar Schneider, pp. 297–360. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1996. A look at the perceptual dialectology method, exploring speakers’ beliefs and opinions about their own and others’ speech.

Purnell, T., W. Isardi, and J. Baugh. “Perceptual and Phonetic Experiments on American English Dialect Identification.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1999): 10–30. An interesting look at how we use speech as a clue to ethnic identities, or the idea of linguistic profiling.

Pyles, Thomas, and John Algeo. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Cengage, 2010. For those interested in specific grammatical and phonological changes over time, this (somewhat technical) book provides details and examples of the major social and linguistic events that led to the development of Modern English.

Rampton, Ben. *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*. New York: Longman, 1995. This book examines the idea of language crossing and explores how multiracial British adolescents are using such linguistic appropriation to redefine their identities.

Rickford, John, and Russell Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000. Discusses the many facets of Black English and how linguistic research can help us understand this dialect.

Roberts, Paul. "A Brief History of English." In *Exploring Language*, edited by Gary Goshgarian, pp. 31–40. New York: Longman, 2001. Provides a very readable, short summary of the main periods and influences in the development of English.

Romaine, Suzanne, and Deborah Lange. "The Use of like as a Marker of Reported Speech and Thought: A Case of Grammaticalization in Progress." *American Speech* 66, no. 3 (1991): 227–279. This article explores how the quotative use of *like* ("I'm like 'he's so great!'") has developed and is used.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation." *Language* 50, no. 4 (1974): 696–735. The seminal work on the turn-taking mechanism behind our conversations.

Sankoff, Gillian. "Age: Apparent Time and Real Time." In *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Keith Brown, pp. 110–116. Oxford: Elsevier, 2006. Examines how well apparent time studies have been able to measure changes in progress and distinguish such changes from age-graded phenomena.

Sankoff, Gillian, and Helene Blondeau. "Language Change across the Lifespan: /r/ in Montreal French." *Language* 83, no.3 (2007): 560–588. A study of the accessibility and rate of linguistic change in adulthood, long considered to be a life stage in which linguistic change was no longer possible.

Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Roy Harris. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1983. This summary and translation of Saussure's lectures at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911 presents his view on langue and parole.

Schneider, Edgar. "The Dynamics of New Englishes: From Identity Construction to Dialect Birth." *Language* 79, no. 2 (2003): 233–281. This scholarly article discusses the emergence and development processes of postcolonial Englishes around the world.

Stuart-Smith, J., Gwilym Pryce, Claire Timmins, and Barrie Gunter. "Television Can Also Be a Factor in Language Change: Evidence from an Urban Dialect." *Language* 89, no. 3 (2013): 501–536. A somewhat phonetically detailed account of the influence of a number of factors, including the media, on the diffusion of dialect features in Glasgow English.

Tagliamonte, Sali A., and Derek Denis. "Linguistic Ruin? LOL! Instant Messaging and Teen Language." *American Speech* 83, no. 1 (2008): 3–34. A study of instant messaging with a view to how it might be affecting the language of young people.

Thomas, Erik. "Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics of African American Vernacular English." *Language and Linguistics Compass* 1, no. 5 (2007): 450–475. A slightly technical but still accessible article summarizing the main characteristics of AAE in terms of sound variations (phonology and phonetics), including differences between AAE and other English varieties in prosody.

Thurlow, Crispin. "Generation Txt? The Sociolinguistics of Young People's Text-messaging." *Discourse Analysis Online*, 2003. <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/>

daol/articles/v1/n1/a3/thurlow2002003-t.html. Looks at the communicative form and function of young people's text messages.

Trudgill, Peter. *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974. Examines a number of both consonant and vowel features typical of speech in Norwich, England, to explore the role of class and gender in linguistic change. Also looks at the notion of overt and covert prestige and its role in linguistic change.

———. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. Chapter 1 details the dialectic relationship between language and society from a sociolinguistic standpoint.

———. *Sociolinguistic Variation and Change*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press: 2002. A collection of Trudgill's work on language change that focuses more on European languages and minority languages than on American English. Section 5, in particular, looks at pressures on Modern Englishes.

University of Iowa. *Phonetics: The Sounds of American English*. <http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/english/frameset.html>. A good website to explore the sounds of American English, both vowels and consonants.

University of Pennsylvania Linguistics Laboratory. *TELSUR Project*. [http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/home.html](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html). This website is home to both the TELSUR and ANAE projects, run by William Labov at the University of Pennsylvania. Here, you can read chapters from *The Atlas of North American English*, along with recent papers on regional dialectology. You can also explore regionally diagnostic maps and features.

Van Herk, Gerard. "Fear of a Black Phonology: The Northern Cities Shift as Linguistic White Flight." *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 14, no. 2 (2008): Article 19. Examines the relationship between African American migration northward and the rise of the Northern Cities Shift.

———. *What Is Sociolinguistics?* Maldin, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. An accessible and entertaining introduction to the main figures, concepts, and research in the field of sociolinguistics.

Wardhaugh, Ronald. “Change.” In *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. This chapter from a widely used sociolinguistics text covers the topic of age grading and real-time change, as well as the role of gender and class in linguistic changes.

Wolfram, Walt, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English: Dialects and Variation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. An introductory text that focuses on American English, examining both regional and social dialects. It also provides examples and discussion of the different methods of regional mapping and data collection.